

DOCTOR WHO

COLDHEART

TREVOR BAXENDALE

BBC

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The Doctor, Fitz and Compassion arrive on the planet Eskon – a

strange world of ice and fire. Far beneath the planet's burning surface are vast lakes frozen solid by the glacial subterranean temperature.

But the civilised community that relies on the ice reservoirs for its survival has more to worry about than a shortage of water. The hideous slimers –

degenerate mutations in the population – are growing more hostile by the moment, and their fanatical leader will stop at nothing to exact revenge against those in authority. But what connects the slimers to the unknown horror that lurks deep beneath the ice? And what is the terrible truth that the city leaders will do anything to conceal?

To unearth the ugliest secrets of Eskon, the TARDIS crew becomes involved in a desperate conflict. While Fitz is embroiled in the deadly plans of the slimers, the Doctor and Compassion must lead a danger-fraught subterranean expedition to prevent a disaster that could destroy the very essence of Eskon. . . it's cold heart.

This is another in the series of original adventures for the Eighth Doctor.

DOCTOR WHO

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COLDHEART

TREVOR BAXENDALE

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and Konnie*

– *the three warmest hearts I could have hoped for* Contents

Chapter One: A Hard Place

1

Chapter Two: Once Bitten

9

Chapter Three: Into the Fire

15

Chapter Four: Warm Welcome

21

Chapter Five: Baktan

29

Chapter Six: Challenges

37

Chapter Seven: The Inside-Out Planet

43

Chapter Eight: The Hard Line

49

Chapter Nine: Agendas

57

Chapter Ten: Family Matters

65

Chapter Eleven: Slimer!

73

Chapter Twelve: Close Quarters

81

Chapter Thirteen: Ckeho

89

Chapter Fourteen: The Squirming

97

Chapter Fifteen: Fear of the Dark

105

Chapter Sixteen: Eve of Disaster

113

Chapter Seventeen: The Expedition

119

Chapter Eighteen: Fall Girl

127

Chapter Nineteen: Fight

137

Chapter Twenty: Fright

143

Chapter Twenty-One: Better Out Than In

151

Chapter Twenty-Two: Hijack

159

Chapter Twenty-Three: Detonator

167

Chapter Twenty-Four: Sins of the Father

175

Chapter Twenty-Five: Best-Laid Schemes

183

Chapter Twenty-Six: Food Chain

189

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Last Word

199

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Ice Breaker

209

Chapter Twenty-Nine: It Never Rains. . .

Chapter Thirty: When the Heat Cools Off

225

Acknowledgements

229

About the Author

231

Chapter One

A Hard Place

‘We’re in a cave,’ said the Doctor.

It wasn’t so much the enthusiasm in the Doctor’s words that irritated Fitz as the hollow echo. The Doctor’s light, excitable voice bounced around the darkness like a demented recording, repeating itself over and over until the simply effusive tone had been mutated into one of manic glee.

Fitz Kreiner detested caves. They were cold, usually damp, and always, inescapably, insufferably *hard*. It was also dark - so dark that Fitz was scared to move at all in case he whacked his head against a stony outcrop. For an anxious moment he suddenly realised he couldn’t even see the Doctor.

‘I’m over here,’ said the Doctor’s voice, displaying the man’s uncanny, and sometimes extremely irritating, propensity to know exactly what you were thinking.

‘Well, I’m *here*,’ Fitz said out loud, feeling a little silly. ‘Compassion?’

Compassion’s voice was low, cool and devoid of panic: ‘Over here.’

It took a few seconds for Fitz to realise that he was now none the wiser, given the number of echoes reverberating from the rocky walls of wherever it was they were. The Doctor and Compassion could have been anywhere.

‘Hang on,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’ve got a torch here somewhere.’

There was a brief pause while the Doctor presumably rummaged through his pockets, and then a soft click. The Doctor's face leapt into view, its long, chiselled features lit from below by a small circle of electric light. He was standing some yards to the left of Fitz, in a completely different place to where Fitz's ears had placed him.

The Doctor turned the beam of his torch away from his own face, and found those of Fitz and then Compassion with ease. In the light of the torch Compassion looked even more pale and statuesque than usual, almost like a stone effigy guarding the entrance of a mausoleum. A light scatter of freckles was the only visible concession to her human origins. She was standing relatively close to Fitz, but he couldn't detect any kind of animal warmth from her at all, or even any hint of breath suspended in the dank air.

Perhaps Compassion was unhappy with such close scrutiny, because as Fitz watched she stepped casually out of the torchlight to be swallowed up by the

blackness. Maybe she could see in the dark, like a cat.

“The cat. He walked by himself,” murmured the Doctor quietly, now close enough to make Fitz jump. “And all places were alike to him.”

‘That’s Kipling,’ said Fitz.

‘Yes, said the Doctor. ‘I’ve always enjoyed a good kipple.’

He’s worried about something, thought Fitz. He only nicks my crap jokes like that when he’s worried. ‘Are you -’

‘Worried?’

No.’

The Doctor shone his torch about, the light reflecting jaggedly from the heavy, dark rock all around them. ‘This is perfect. *Perfect.*’

‘For what?’ Compassion’s voice echoed from several different directions.

The Doctor flashed his light on to her face once more, unerringly picking it out of the gloom about five yards away, presumably for Fitz’s benefit. ‘It’s just a cave,’ she added with a shrug. ‘It could be anywhere. Random co-ordinates, remember.’

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ said the Doctor, ‘but even a random materialisation could be detected from Gallifrey if the Time Lords happened to be looking in the right direction. This way we avoid any planetary surface scans that might strike lucky.’ He used the torch to check that both Fitz and Compassion were impressed by this. They just stared back at him. He coughed and moved quickly past them both, saying, ‘Besides which, caves are always interesting.

Look.’

The torchlight settled on a patch of stone that glittered frostily in the radiance. Then Fitz realised it *was* frost.

‘Blimey, no wonder it’s so cold.’ Fitz’s breath expanded in a grey cloud through the beam of light and then condensed into a fresh patina of crystals on the rock. When he spoke he took care to avoid letting his teeth chatter:

‘Couldn’t we randomly go somewhere warm?’ It was typical, he reflected, that they should materialise underground in a freezing ruddy cave rather than, say, a subtropical beach. He’d have settled for the Caribbean, but there was no guarantee that they were even on Earth. For a TARDIS, random space-time co-ordinates meant exactly that they could literally be anywhere in the universe, at any point in time. ‘Haven’t you got *any* idea where we are?’ he asked Compassion.

‘I get my bearings from galactic zero centre,’ she explained, ‘but I can’t find them blind.’

The Doctor was examining the icy rock face in minute detail using a combination of his torch and a magnifying glass, but Fitz guessed he was listening intently to what Compassion was saying.

‘I’m still not certain how my own position in the space-time continuum is defined. As a temporally annexed life form I am irrevocably linked to the 2

space-time vortex too: Only relatively recently had the once human Compassion completed her unnatural evolution into a TARDIS.

‘Hold it, you’ve lost me,’ said Fitz. ‘Keep it simple: I’m from Earth. I only want to know why we can’t just go somewhere else. A warm somewhere else.’

‘Risky,’ muttered the Doctor. ‘Every time Compassion dematerialises, we increase the chance of the Time Lords getting a definite trace on

her. A rapid sequence of journeys would cause a build-up of residual Artron energy in the vortex, and that would only attract attention.'

'I'm only making a point. I know we've got to steer clear of any Time Lord agents, but I don't fancy skulking around in caves for the rest of my life.'

The Doctor sighed. 'It's only for now, while I think up a suitable plan of campaign. We've got to lie low for a bit, that's all.'

'A suitable plan of campaign,' repeated Fitz dully. The Doctor never planned anything: he lurched from danger to danger, surviving and putting things right as he went, usually on a purely ad hoc basis.

'Don't worry,' the Doctor admonished him. 'I'm working on it. In the meantime, look at this.'

He tapped the nearest bit of rock with the handle of his magnifying glass and then handed the latter to Fitz. Fitz squatted down on his haunches to peer through the lens at a patch of frost illuminated by the torchlight. It glistened back at him like a galaxy of tiny twinkling stars.

'What am I looking for?' he asked eventually.

'Protozoa,' said Compassion, leaning over his shoulder.

'Bless you.'

'Unicellular micro-organisms in the ice,' she confirmed matter-of-factly, as if she could see them with her naked eye. Which she probably could. Fitz couldn't see a damned thing, even through the magnifier.

'Um, so what?'

'Life, Fitz!' exploded the Doctor impatiently. His voice echoed madly around the cave. 'Wherever we are, we're not alone.'

Fitz stood up and slapped the magnifying glass back into the Doctor's open hand. 'That's a relief. If I get bored with you two showing off, at least I can still feel superior to our pals the micro-organisms here.'

'Don't underestimate micro-organisms.'

'You mean even they could be brighter than me?'

‘Oh yes, that’s my point exactly. Find the right kind and they could provide a low-level photoluminescence.’ The Doctor moved off, taking his pool of light with him.

‘He means phosphorescent fungus,’ said Compassion.

‘Do me a favour, both of you,’ said Fitz. ‘Stop explaining what each other means and just patronise me instead.’

3

* * *

They walked for several minutes in silence, apart from Fitz’s muted curses as he occasionally banged his head. The Doctor’s torch sent a patch of light bobbing up and down ahead of them, picking out what he considered to be this extremely interesting patch of rock, or that particularly fascinating patch of rock.

‘Excuse me,’ called Fitz, ‘but do we actually know where we’re going? I mean, we could be heading deeper into the cave system, couldn’t we? Presuming that there is actually a way out.’

Compassion said, ‘Fitz has a point. We’re descending.’

The Doctor stopped in his tracks. ‘Shh. Listen. Thought I heard something, then.’

Fitz halted in mid-step, standing motionless, his brain whizzing through every kind of thing he knew might live in a cave. Bats? Rats? Even grizzly bears, for goodness’ sake! A very tiny sound escaped from his throat, the sort of sound you can’t help making when you realise something awful.

‘Shh!’ said the Doctor and Compassion together. They stood in silence for a while, straining with their ears for any sound above Fitz’s breathing. There couldn’t be a grizzly bear living in this cave, he told himself. They’d not come across any bones or anything scattered around.

‘That’s it!’ said the Doctor, and Fitz jumped guiltily. ‘Did you hear it?’

Compassion nodded. ‘Some kind of movement, up ahead. The cave acoustics are very changeable around here, though, so it’s difficult to be sure.’

‘What?’ asked Fitz. ‘What is it?’

‘Let’s find out!’ The Doctor started forward again, his voice full of eagerness to explore.

And then the torch went out.

‘Hey!’ Fitz’s heart forgot a beat as they were plunged into absolute darkness.

‘Sorry,’ said the Doctor’s voice. The torch flashed back on, but the light was a feeble yellow colour and hardly reached his nose. Even as they watched, it began to fade, dying away until all they could see was the orange remnant of the bulb filament.

‘Terrific,’ said Fitz. ‘Battery’s gone.’

‘I think I’ve got a couple of spares, don’t worry,’ said the Doctor. ‘Used to belong to Sam’s personal CD player. Or was it Mel’s? My memory is hopeless these days.’

They waited patiently in the dark while the Doctor went through his pockets, which, while certainly capacious, were by no means bigger on the inside than the outside. Even those pockets, reckoned Fitz, must carry only a finite amount of junk. They listened as the Doctor muttered his way blindly through the contents. ‘Sonic screwdriver, yo-yo, dog whistle, salt and pepper. . . ’

4

There was a long, dark pause.

‘Nope, no batteries. You think someone would’ve invented an everlasting torch, wouldn’t you?’

‘So, where does this leave us?’ Fitz asked, toying with the idea of asking if Compassion could provide a light source. Through her eyes, perhaps, like car headlamps?

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, ‘it rather leaves us between the proverbial rock and a *hyurrrk*!’

‘Pardon?’

‘He said, “it rather leaves us between the proverbial rock and a *hyurrrk*”,’

repeated Compassion.

‘I’m down here!’ The Doctor’s voice suddenly sounded a long way off, the echo somewhat more pronounced than before. ‘I’ve, um, fallen down a hole.’

‘Are you all right?’

‘Of course I’m all right. You don’t live to be my age without learning a thing or two about falling down holes.’ The Doctor’s distant voice drifted through the blackness. ‘I could definitely do with a light, though. Fitz, have you still got your cigarette lighter with you?’

‘Erm -’

‘It’s in your left-hand jacket pocket. Toss it down, will you?’

‘Hang on.’ Fitz produced the heavy Zippo lighter and flicked it open. It struck first time, of course, and he turned the flame up high. A flickering yellow light set the shadows dancing spasmodically around them. On the edge of the glow he could see Compassion’s ghostly face watching him. Fitz held the lighter out in front of him, as low as he could, and tried to find the hole. His next cautious step planted his foot firmly in nothing and suddenly he was falling. With a yelp Fitz hurtled forward and then struck the ground with a shocking thud.

When his eyes refocused, he found the Doctor bending over him, holding the Zippo aloft. ‘Thought I’d just drop in,’ he groaned.

‘I knew you’d say that. Are you hurt?’

‘As a matter of fact, yes. I haven’t had the luxury of several centuries’ prac-tice in falling down holes, you see. Made the mistake of landing flat on my arse. Silly me.’

The Doctor clapped him on the shoulder and helped him sit up. ‘Good, good. As long as you haven’t sprained your ankle. I’m afraid I’d have had to leave you here to die if you’d done that. I make it a rule nowadays: no one travels with me unless they have sturdy ankles.’

‘No chance. Strong legs run in my family.’

The Doctor laughed. ‘Really? Noses run in mine!’

‘If you two have finished swapping schoolboy jokes,’ said

Compassion's voice from the darkness above, 'perhaps we can address the real problem at hand.'

The Doctor stood up, helping Fitz to his feet with one hand and raising the cigarette lighter high over his head. In the flickering luminescence they could just see the lip of the hole they had fallen into, a good six or seven feet up.

They watched Compassion step off the edge and drop, like an amber ghost, to land easily on the balls of her feet next to them. She might as well have just stepped off the kerb, thought Fitz.

'I can sense movement up ahead,' she told them. 'There are slight changes in the barometric pressure.'

Fitz peered into the veil of blackness beyond the light of his Zippo. 'Don't tell me: grizzly bear.'

'I don't think so.'

'Something with a small brain and large teeth, though, no doubt.'

'Don't be such a pessimist, Fitz,' chided the Doctor. 'Can you give us anything more specific, Compassion?'

'Not without a better understanding of the cave system itself. It's a mixture of types from what I can see. . . '

'I know what you mean,' the Doctor agreed. He was edging further into the darkness, taking the lighter with him. After a few seconds he was just a silhouette against the flickering glow. 'Natural caves evolve in a variety of ways, mainly as a result of the solvent action of water and compounds within it. But there's evidence of aeolian wear too – which is odd, because that kind of cave is usually confined to desert or semidesert regions.'

'Which doesn't make much sense when you've got frost down here and the sort of temperatures usually associated with brass monkeys,' said Fitz.

The Doctor shrugged. 'We could be deep. Very, very deep. It would get pretty cold then.'

'Then how would the wind get down here?'

'That's why I say it's odd. Some complex meteorological phenomena

can make most large caverns pretty well ventilated with fresh air, but not enough to cause erosion. I'd say this was largely the result of hydrodynamic activity, personally.'

'Trust you to be a cave expert too.'

'Speleologist. Of course, none of this helps us find out what it is that Compassion's sensing further down the way.' The Doctor was holding the Zippo right out in front of him, but the light barely reached the walls. The cave seemed to disappear for ever into the darkness. Paradoxically, it was starting to feel claustrophobic.

6

'This is getting us nowhere,' complained Fitz, blowing into his hands in an effort to warm up. 'Can't we just -'

He stopped talking and listened as, plainly but distantly, they all heard the sound of a long, agonising scream of terror echoing through the darkness.

7

Chapter Two

Once Bitten

Brevus stared at the arched entrance to the dropshaft, willing the doors to slide open and for Graco to walk through them. He had been gone an hour already. How much longer should he wait?

The empty silence of the control room was irritating Brevus now. The machinery was humming as power ran through the automated systems, but it was barely audible. There was a flat taste of electricity in the air that always made his tongue curl.

'Do you think Graco has found anything?' he heard Zela ask.

Brevus snorted. 'Undoubtedly. Even if it is just a pack of knivors. That's probably the most likely explanation.'

'Yes,' Zela hesitated before continuing: 'The knivors usually stay away from the main shaft, though. Graco said he wasn't going to check the subsidiary tunnels.'

'I'm fully aware of that, Zela. Graco knows what he's doing. I would not have let him go otherwise.' Abruptly Brevus turned around, away

from the dropshaft, to face Zela. Zela was one of Tor Grymna's Custodians, assigned to guard the mine against attack by bandits or slimers. For this tour of duty, at least. His shift ended tonight, along with that of Brevus. They were due to return to Baktan very shortly, and Brevus could hardly wait to leave. The replacement personnel had arrived and the sandcar was waiting outside.

But there was still the matter of Graco's disappearance to deal with.

'You can go now, Zela,' Brevus told him. 'Wait in the sandcar with the others.'

Zela started. 'What are you going to do?'

'I'm going down there to look for Graco.' Brevus turned back towards the dropshaft, and then hesitated. He glanced back at Zela, who was still watching him. 'Give me your handbow.'

It was impossible for Compassion to determine how far away the scream had originated. In these caves, it could have been kilometres. Direction was difficult as well, but it was obvious even to the Doctor and Fitz that the cry had come from deeper into the caves.

9

'Someone needs help,' said the Doctor, starting forward before even the first echoes had died. The flame of the cigarette lighter flared wildly as he moved.

Fitz jerked forward to stop him. 'Wait a sec. Let's think about this.'

The Doctor's face, pale in the faint light, looked stunned. 'What's there to think about? Someone's in trouble!'

'Yeah, but what's *causing* the trouble? We could be running right into it ourselves.' Fitz had a point, thought Compassion, but he was clearly motivated by self-preservation. The complete opposite of the Doctor. Together they practically cancelled each other out.

'I'll go,' she said.

They looked at her, both thinking the same thing: she's indestructible. And being indestructible, Compassion knew, could make one appear brave. Still, it seemed to give even the Doctor at least pause for thought.

‘Fitz is right – we *don’t* know what’s down there,’ he said, clearly torn. He was practically hopping from foot to foot in agitation. ‘But it was a long way off. If we’re careful, we can all go.’

Fitz spluttered something. ‘Listen, that was a full-blown scream of mortal terror. Believe me, I’m an expert. Whatever was the cause of that isn’t going to be pleased to see us.’

The Doctor’s blue eyes grew baleful in the dim light. ‘It’s not up for debate,’

he said simply, and turned on his heel to go.

Brevus reached the base of the dropshaft in less than a minute, stepping off the platform before it had fully come to rest, and before he could give himself the chance to change his mind.

The lights came on automatically. There was a fifteen-minute switch-off built into the sensors, so Graco hadn’t been here in the last quarter of an hour.

Brevus suspected this was a bad sign.

He crossed the base chamber and, after only a second’s hesitation, pressed the control that unlocked the shaft doors. They parted with a hiss of pneu-matics and he felt the first chill of the subterranean world beyond.

Zela would be back at the sandcar by now. Brevus wouldn’t blame him if he ordered the crew to turn around and head back straight away.

The thought of being left here, alone, was enough to make Brevus take the step that led over the threshold. The coldness of the air made his skin prickle below the fur. It was darker here, too - the sodium lamps could only manage an amber light that made stripes of black shadow along the tunnel walls where the support beams stood.

No, not alone, he corrected himself. Perhaps he’d meet Graco’s ghost down here.

10

His boots scraped echoes of the granite floor of the tunnel as he headed for the first intersection. It wasn’t cool enough for him to be able to see his breath yet, but there was a definite drop in temperature

as he reached the first insertion grid. There was still some condensation on the steel walls encircling the grid. Brevus stopped long enough to reach out and touch some of the droplets, hurrying them on their way to the channels at the base of the wall where the water collected.

At least everything was still functioning properly.

Around the perimeter of the chamber were more dropshafts - primitive ver-sions of the main shaft, which lowered cages using a clumsy block-and-tackle arrangement. He stepped into one at random and gripped the lever that controlled its descent.

And paused.

What if Graco *was* dead? What then?

The Doctor was kneeling on the ground, holding something in one hand close to the light of the Zippo.

‘Found something?’ Fitz asked, eager to hurry things along. It was getting colder, and darker, and soon they would have no option, he was sure, but to take another chance in Compassion. Anywhere else in the universe had to be better than this.

‘Some kind of tool,’ said the Doctor, holding a short, blunt-ended instrument up for them to see. He held the Zippo closer. Light reflected from a metallic, steel-coloured surface. ‘It’s been manufactured, too. Evidence of some kind of technological civilisation.’

‘Looks a bit like a hammer,’ said Fitz, ‘or part of one.’

‘Some sort of mining tool, perhaps?’ wondered Compassion.

The Doctor stood up, nodding. ‘Ever read *Down Among the Dead Men* by Professor B-’

‘Doctor!’ Compassion interrupted him quickly. ‘There’s something coming.’

Even Fitz could feel it this time – a sudden cold breeze, like the draught in the London Underground when a tube’s about to arrive. The thought jangled in his head like an alarm klaxon. What could cause that much air displacement? He looked at the Doctor, his profile picked out in the amber light as he faced the wind, eyes narrowed,

long hair flicking out behind him.

‘Down!’ ordered the Doctor suddenly.

It came very fast, along with a noise like a thousand flapping wings. The air was suddenly full of *things*, flying things, bats probably – or worse. Fitz ducked instinctively, but not quickly enough. He felt something strike his shoulder like a fist, and something else bashed at his head. All around him was the noise, the roar and clap of leathery wings. He heard the Doctor call out 11

something, but he couldn’t tell what. He couldn’t see anything either, because he had his eyes tight shut and his arms clamped over his face. He cried out as something landed on his wrists and tugged, hard, before disappearing in a flurry of movement.

Then something bit his leg. He realised it half a second after the bolt of agony shot up from his calf, and the thought of it was actually much worse than the pain. Something had *bitten* him.

He lashed out with his foot, struck a rock or something, twisted and lashed out again, trying to knock the thing off or squash it or break its sodding neck.

The pain was nothing compared with the revulsion Fitz felt.

‘Fitz! Stop it! It’s all right! They’ve gone.’

He felt his arms being held, felt the velvet of the Doctor’s coat on his face as he was grabbed. He opened his eyes, gasping, half falling, until the Doctor managed to manoeuvre him into a sitting position on the ground. There was no sign of the bats, no noise, nothing. Just the sound of his own ragged hyperventilation.

‘It’s all right, just relax.’

‘Bit me. It bit me.’

‘Don’t worry, it’s dead,’ said Compassion. In the light of the Zippo Fitz could see she was holding something up, something that hung limply from her fist like an old rag.

‘Wh-what is it?’

She shrugged. ‘Some kind of bat, I think. Big, though.’

Fitz swallowed dryly and chanced a look at his leg, which the Doctor

was already examining. He couldn't see much in the gloom, apart from a mess of denim and a dark stain that glistened when the light caught it. Blood. Fitz felt sick, and a bit faint. 'How bad is it?'

'Bad enough.' The Doctor gripped the leg of Fitz's torn jeans and ripped the material apart. Fitz looked away. He didn't want to see how bad 'bad enough'

was.

'Hurts like bloody hell,' he gasped, rather bravely, he thought.

'Have you still got that flask of Grekolian whisky I told you not to carry around with you?' asked the Doctor.

Fitz nodded, smiling weakly. 'Good idea.' He pulled the flat silver flask from his hip pocket. It was no bigger than a pocket diary but the juice inside was powerful stuff, he knew. He unscrewed the lid and raised it to his lips, only to have it plucked from his fingers by the Doctor.

'Hey!'

The Doctor started to splash the whisky liberally over the wound, and Fitz nearly yelled out in pain. 'Flippin' heck, Doctor!'

12

'I told you it was rough stuff, Fitz,' the Doctor retorted, shutting the flask and vanishing it into one of his own pockets. 'Excellent antiseptic, though.'

'Won't help if it's rabid,' commented Compassion.

'Oh, *thank* you.'

She was examining the creature more closely now. It resembled a small, hairless dog with wicked-looking ears and a short, whiplike tail. A pair of membranous wings hung limply from its shoulders.

'Ravaged by a bald Chihuahua,' muttered Fitz. He tried to say it through gritted teeth, and became incomprehensible by the end of the sentence. He was about to repeat it when he had to stop and wince again as the Doctor started to tie something around his leg.

'This should help stem the bleeding for now,' he said. The wing collar of his shirt was open, and Fitz realised he must be using his silk cravat as a bandage.

Now that was class.

‘Can you walk?’

‘If there’s any sign of those dog-bats again, I’ll flamin’ well run the four-minute mile.’

‘Good, good. Up you get.’

‘This is becoming a - *ouch* - habit, Doc.’

‘Just so long as it hasn’t done any damage to your ankle.’

Compassion stepped back up, a look of irritation now on her wide, stoic features. She looked like she wanted to be carrying a weapon. ‘I’ve just scanned the area ahead,’ she said. ‘There’s a steep drop ahead, almost a tunnel, leading down at a one-in-five gradient. There’s a significant temperature drop too.’

Fitz gagged. ‘You mean it gets c-colder? Oh, forget it. I can’t go on.’

The Doctor helped keep him upright with a grimace. Not, Fitz suspected, because of the physical effort either. ‘There’s been no more screaming, has there?’

Compassion shook her head. ‘Whoever it was screamed their last scream.’

‘We’re too late. Sad, but true.’ Fitz tried not to inject too much pleading into his voice, but it was difficult. ‘Please can we go, now?’

The Doctor’s lips parted audibly as he conceded the argument. ‘He’s right.

We can’t carry on like this. He’s going to go into shock if we don’t get him warm and treat that wound.’

Fitz found that he didn’t actually care that he was being talked about as if he wasn’t there. Or conscious. Oh no. Don’t tell me I’m going to faint.

Rousing himself, Fitz tried to sound firm but agonised. ‘Let’s go back inside. . .

TARDIS.’

‘It’s too late,’ he heard the Doctor saying. Distantly he realised that the

Doctor had to speak up over the noise of the wind in the trees. Trees?
Pull 13

yourself together, Kreiner! It's not the wind. It's the sound of wings. The dog-bats are back. He heard the Doctor gabbling to Compassion about another wave of them. . . something about scenting the blood. . . carnivorous. . .

And then they came again, but this time there were more of them. They hurtled up the passage, a roaring, screaming mass of gnashing teeth and beating wings, claws, tails - and stench. The first and strongest fell on Fitz's leg, tearing at the bloody rags of his jeans. More were alighting on his back and shoulders as he tried to curl up into a ball. They were in the Doctor's hair, tangled, screeching, flapping, scratching. The cigarette lighter was dropped and extinguished.

14

Chapter Three

Into the Fire

When Fitz Kreiner opened his eyes, he found the light to be gloriously, won-derfully blinding. For several delicious moments he couldn't see at all.

'Who're you?' he heard the Doctor say, and something moved in the glare.

'My name is Brevus. Who are you?'

'The Doctor. Very pleased to meet you.' Something jumped up quickly, brushing dirt and dust from the sleeves of its coat. A surge of profound relief flooded through Fitz, and emerged as a hacking cough.

'This is Fitz,' said the darkest blur in the light. 'He's been injured.'

'The knivors are vicious and predatory,' said the other voice. Brevus. 'They hunt in packs of a hundred or so, depending on the size of the nest. You were lucky to survive.'

'Indeed. I assume it was you and your very bright torch that saw them off, then?'

Fitz pushed himself up on one elbow. His eyes were just watering now, but they had grown used to the light. The Doctor was standing

nearby, talking to a large man dressed in loose, sandy-coloured clothes. He was humanoid, but there was an alien quality to his features: wide-apart brown eyes, tan fur falling in a straggling mass from the crown of his head to the small of his back.

In one large hand he held some kind of lamp.

Fitz took a deep breath and looked down at his leg, half steeling himself to find it missing from the knee down. But it was still there, still a mess. The blood that had seeped through the Doctor's cravat had turned the grey silk a dark-brown colour.

Scattered around them were several dead dog-bats. All were lying in little broken heaps like discarded dolls, or rats that had been hit by a car. As he looked, Fitz saw Compassion drop another loose carcass on to the floor. He had the distinct feeling that she had killed all the others, too, probably by grabbing them out of the air and whacking their heads against the rock. And good for her, too, he decided.

'Can you walk?' asked the man called Brevus. Fitz jumped visibly as he realised he was talking to him.

'Er. . . '

15

The Doctor interceded. 'I'm sure Fitz can manage a short walk. If you'll show us the way?'

Brevus nodded. 'The knivors won't come back while there's light, but it doesn't pay to linger near their nesting grounds at any time. What were you doing here?'

Brevus had turned as if to leave, presumably intending to talk as they went.

The Doctor made a hurried 'help Fitz!' gesture at Compassion and then jogged to catch up with their saviour.

'I've just realised, we haven't thanked you properly,' he said, but Brevus seemed not to hear, or even be listening.

Compassion helped Fitz to his feet, and Fitz made a great play of the pain and discomfort.

'Get up,' she told him brusquely.

'I love it when - yeeow - you're so domineering,' Fitz replied, only to feel Compassion's boot accidentally crash into his wounded shin. Flames of agony engulfed his leg and he cried out, his voice echoing stupidly around the cave and causing both the Doctor and Brevus to turn back and look at him.

'Try to make a little less noise,' Compassion advised him innocently.

Fitz bit back a possible response and concentrated on hobbling along with her after the Doctor and his new friend. He realised quite soon that, although the dog-bats had torn at the flesh of his calf, the actual damage was superficial.

It hurt like bloody hell, but he could probably have walked on his own if he had to. So thinking, he sank a little heavier against Compassion's grip and moaned heroically through his teeth. He didn't know where this Brevus bloke was taking them, but it was away from this place and, hopefully, somewhere light and warm.

Brevus regarded the Doctor with interest. Offworld visitors were not common, but he knew enough about some of the various alien species in this part of space to know that the Doctor and his companions were termed *human*, or at least *humanoid*. They were sufficiently similar to himself not to be off-putting

- two legs, two arms and a head. Two eyes, a nose, a mouth. They were skinny, they wore strange clothes, they had oddly coloured hair. That was about it.

And the Doctor talked a lot.

'So, how come you found us down here?' he was asking, neatly reversing the question Brevus had already put to him - and not yet received an answer to.

Brevus didn't reply straightaway. He was still thinking about Graco, but these people had an injured party in their midst and needed help. But did 16

that just provide him with the excuse he needed to abandon the search for Graco and return to the control room?

'Can you tell us where we are?' continued the Doctor, undeterred. 'I mean, which planet we're on?'

'This is Eskon.'

‘Eskon,’ the Doctor repeated. ‘Eskon, Eskon, Eskon. . . No, never heard of it. I suspect it’s a little off the beaten track.’

Presently they arrived at the end of the long passage. Fitz was impressed by the increasing sensation of warmth, a definite rise in the ambient temperature, which soothed his muscles. Brevus helped them into a wide steel cage like a minor’s lift and activated the mechanism that sent it rattling upwards. It was a long journey, and Fitz had to waggle his jaw and swallow several times to alleviate the pressure differences as they made themselves felt in his ears.

Presently they emerged into a wide, circular steel room dominated by a thick set of metal pipes running through the floor and ceiling.

The Doctor immediately darted forward and examined the pipework. Some of them were as broad as a man’s shoulders, some no more than drainpipes.

After a few seconds Fitz realised that all these pipes surrounded a much thicker one running through the centre of the room. Its diameter must have been at least fifteen feet, possibly more.

‘This is some kind of suction drill, isn’t it?’ the Doctor asked Brevus.

Brevus nodded. Still playing it noncommittal. Fitz supposed he wasn’t used to running into aliens. In the brighter light of this metal chamber, he could see Brevus more clearly. He was tall, with a narrow head and long, bony nose. His eyes were large and brown, surrounded by thick lashes. The mane of tawny fur was braided into thin ropes and threaded with multicoloured beads. His shoulders were broad, although it didn’t look like padding from the way his clothes hung. The clothes themselves were made from some kind of mixture of rough hessian and hide, draped loosely over his upper torso but belted with a wide band of leather at the waist. The belt carried a number of pouches and attachments.

All in all, Brevus reminded Fitz of someone, but he couldn’t think of whom.

There was something noble about that long, sandy-furred face, though. And something a little comical too.

‘Condensers!’ the Doctor said suddenly, crossing over to the wall where moisture was running down the cold steel in narrow little trickles. It collected in a series of shaped crevices near the bottom, to be channelled out of the room. The Doctor ran a finger up the flow of

water and then licked it. 'Definitely H2O. This is an ice mine, isn't it? I knew it! As soon as I saw those suction drills, I guessed this was a mine.'

17

Brevus seemed to regard the Doctor with some amusement. But then, the Doctor often had this effect on people. He was already rushing around the far side of the main pipe, examining the details. 'Suspension linkages here. . .

shock dampers. . . flowback valves. . . It's quite a nice bit of work, all in all.

How do you prevent vapour pressure?'

'It is conducted from the mine workings direct via a separate set of ventilation shafts,' said Brevus. 'These smaller pipes are subsidiary outlets.'

'Of course, very neat.' The Doctor finished his circuit of the drill. 'May we see the control room?'

He's like a kid in a railway yard, thought Fitz. He's completely forgotten about why we came here, about the caves and the dog-bat things. He's probably even forgotten I'm wounded.

'That is where I'm taking you,' Brevus said, heading for an arched doorway on the opposite side of the room.

'Great,' said the Doctor enthusiastically. Turning back to Fitz and Compassion, he added, 'Come on, you two. He's taking us to the control room.'

Fitz sighed and looked at Compassion. Her face was a mask of disinterest. In fact, she almost looked as if she weren't quite there - as if her brain were somewhere else completely, thinking about something else entirely. He watched as she sauntered after the Doctor and Brevus, her easy, man's stride still playing havoc with Fitz's senses after all this time. She looked like a girl, but she walked like a man. It was something more to do with attitude than physiognomy.

It was only then that Fitz realised she'd left him leaning against the wall by the lift exit. 'Hey! Wait for me! I'm the walking wounded, y'know!'

‘Precisely,’ she said as he caught them up in the next room.

It was another lift - but this one was better, less of a practical cage. It was warmer again, too, which was very welcome. Fitz felt as though there was actually a few degrees of body heat returning to his bones now. He limped across the platform and leaned against the wall as it ascended.

‘How does this work?’ wondered the Doctor, balancing on the balls of his feet as the lift moved smoothly upwards. ‘Static electricity?’

‘Yes,’ said Brevus.

‘Thought so. Could smell it in the air.’ The Doctor reached out and touched Fitz lightly on the nose, sending an audible crack of static charge through him.

‘I thought static electricity was used for sticking balloons to the ceiling,’ Fitz muttered.

‘Among other things,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘The Daleks were always pretty good with static electricity. Ever heard of them?’

This was directed at Brevus, who said that he hadn’t.

‘Consider yourself lucky. Not good company.’

18

Fitz said, ‘They’re hopeless with balloons, too, I hear.’

‘Terrible.’ The Doctor grinned. ‘Dalek parties are always rubbish.’

When the lift slowed to a stop, Brevus operated the door mechanism and they followed him out into the control room proper. It was, again, circular in design, with elegant instrument consoles dotted around its circumference on a raised catwalk. There was a cool amber light source above their heads, and Fitz could hear the muted hum of an air-conditioning unit. Directly opposite was the main entrance and exit: a pair of wide, interlocking steel doors set in a low archway. The two doors joined horizontally.

Without waiting for an invitation, the Doctor jumped up on to the control catwalk and inspected the machinery, easing himself past a guard. The coloured lights of various dials and indicators reflected from the Doctor’s face, which suddenly took on a puzzled look. ‘Why

do you need guards here?’

‘We have to be prepared for potential problems,’ said Brevus, evidently unwilling to speak about it.

But the Doctor wasn’t about to leave it at that. ‘Problems? Of the kind that make you want to carry a hand weapon?’

Brevus looked at the handbow. He hadn’t had to use it, after all. It would have been useless against the knivors, anyway. ‘No. This is merely a security measure.’

‘Of course.’

The Doctor was carefully not watching as Brevus laid the handbow down on a work surface close to the dropshaft doors. But Compassion picked the weapon up and examined it, pulling a face at its apparent simplicity. It worked by firing pencil-sized bolts powered by some kind of tiny pressurised gas can-ister.

Brevus hadn’t even noticed her inspection of the gun. He was still watching the Doctor, but Fitz thought he was looking a little distant, troubled even.

Not necessarily by the appearance of three aliens in his ice mine, either. This prompted Fitz to ask a question:

‘How come ice is so valuable here?’

Brevus smiled thinly. ‘You really haven’t visited Eskon before, have you?’

‘Er, no. Of course not.’

‘This ice mine supplies the whole of the city of Baktan with water,’ explained Brevus simply.

Fitz was impressed. ‘You mine water? Are you in the middle of a drought or something?’

Fitz noticed that the Doctor was looking at him with not quite a smirk on his face. So what was he missing? It wouldn’t be the first time he’d overlooked the obvious, reflected Fitz, *but I am struggling along with a dog-bat-bitten leg here, for Pete’s sake*. To emphasise that fact, he limped a little more theatrically

19
towards the big double doors at the side of them room, where Brevus

was turning a large locking-wheel type mechanism. Fresh air was just what Fitz needed after those wretched caves.

‘I think you’d better prepare yourself for a shock,’ the Doctor told Fitz.

Fitz opened his mouth to reply, but the sudden furnace blast of heat that punched through the open doors took his breath completely away.

20

Chapter Four

Warm Welcome

Soon after emerging from the control room, Fitz was sure he was going to die. In five seconds flat the heat had robbed his lungs of air, dried his lips and tongue, made his skin prickle with evaporating sweat, and, in short, sapped every last bit of energy from his limbs. He literally staggered under its searing weight.

A strong hand fastened around his arm and pulled him upright. It was Compassion, mistakenly thinking that his bad leg had given way beneath him. Fitz struggled to say something, but his mouth felt as if it were made of cardboard.

They were standing on a sand-blown platform of some kind of concrete material, right in front of the double doors. A short passage led back into the extreme cool of the control room, to where Fitz now felt a desperate urge to return.

In front of them was a broad apron of the concrete stuff, which ended in a wide slope leading down to the weirdest desert landscape Fitz had ever seen.

The sand was red-gold, and glittered like fire in the brilliant light of the sun. Dunes undulated away to a horizon made impossibly liquid by the heat haze. Overhead was a vast, coruscating orange sky, utterly devoid of clouds.

A merciless white sun bore down on the desert like a branding iron.

The Doctor stepped forward, screwing his eyes into slits against the glare, his mouth hanging open slightly with the shock of the heat. Fitz was glad to see that even the Doctor, who usually ignored most extremes of temperature, found this hopelessly oppressive.

‘Turned out nice again,’ he told Fitz, who just nodded.

At the base of the slope was a giant caterpillar. It had wheels instead of legs, but it still took a full two seconds for Fitz to realise that it was some kind of vehicle, and not a living creature. It was flat but segmented, about ten feet wide and at least forty long. The entire length of the thing was covered with some sort of rigging holding up tarpaulin sheets, presumably to shelter the occupants from the sun.

The caterpillar now rested in the lee of a long shadow that appeared as a carelessly drawn stripe of black across the desert. The shadow, Fitz realised, was cast by the building from which they had just emerged. Twisting around, 21

he squinted up at the huge tower that pierced the tangerine sky like a steel needle. This was the part of the ice mine that appeared above the surface of the planet, and, like the tip of an iceberg, represented only a fraction of its overall size.

Brevus led them down the concrete slope to the caterpillar, where a number of gangplanks were lowered for them to use by some more of Brevus’s people already waiting on board. As Fitz hobbled down the incline, he felt the heat of the concrete through the soles of his cowboy boots. After only a few steps it began to feel uncomfortable. By the time he reached the bottom, it was like walking on coals. He wouldn’t have been surprised if his boots began to smoulder. Brevus, he noticed, wore his soft boots wrapped in some kind of bandage-type material that protected them from the worst of the heat.

He was helped on board by some of Brevus’s people, and his occasional grunt of pain was not the result of play-acting.

‘This man is wounded,’ Brevus told two of the men who were now support-ing Fitz under the shade of the rigging. ‘He has been attacked by knivors. See to it.’

Having given the instruction, Brevus turned back to face the Doctor and Compassion. ‘Your friend will be treated for injuries here on the sandcar.

When we reach Baktan, he will be given proper medical care. Now, if you would excuse me, I must give the driver orders to get us under way.’

The Doctor thanked him politely and agreed to wait with Compassion at the rear of the vehicle while Fitz was taken towards the front,

where his injuries were to be treated.

‘Maybe that’s where they keep the first-aid box,’ suggested the Doctor lightly.

‘Why don’t I take Fitz inside for treatment?’ asked Compassion when they were alone.

‘I’d rather not attract that kind of attention just yet,’ replied the Doctor quietly as they sat down on a shallow bench in the shade.

‘Is it safe for us to be out in the open like this?’

The Doctor had already removed his dark velvet knee-length jacket, which he now folded across his lap before rolling up the sleeves of his shirt. ‘Well, so long as we keep out of that sun’s more harmful ultraviolet rays, we should be all right. I mean Fitz primarily, of course. You’d be impervious to that kind of damage now.’

‘I’m not worried about sunburn. I’m worried about the Time Lords.’

A momentary cloud crossed the blue of the Doctor’s eyes. ‘Oh. Well, I think we should be safe enough for now. If your materialisation had been detected, there would have been a welcoming party already waiting here for us before you could say cause and effect.’ He held up a hand to shield his eyes from the 22

desert glare as he looked at her. ‘In the meantime, we’ve got new people to meet, and new places to visit.’

‘And fresh problems to confront?’

‘Indubitably.’

Brevus was stopped by Zela on his way to see the sandcar’s driver. ‘Where’s Graco? Did you not find him?’

For a moment Brevus considered lying. But only a moment. ‘No. There’s no trace of him down there. But it’s a big mine. We may have to return tomorrow, to search again.’ Preferably with more men, he thought.

Zela considered this for a few moments, and then appeared to reach a conclusion. ‘He must have been attacked by knivors. Killed, even.’

‘It’s possible,’ Brevus conceded. Zela must have seen the aliens come on board, and seen Fitz’s knivor bites. ‘Zola, I don’t want any

discussion of this with the rest of the crew. I have to speak with the Forum before I can sanction any further action regarding Graco. Do I make myself clear?’

The Custodian nodded, and at that moment the sandcar’s driver stepped up, bristling with impatience.

‘All right, driver,’ Brevus pre-empted the man’s question. ‘Baktan City, as quick as you can.’

The sandcar lurched as it began to move off, each individual segment rolling independently of the next, and the wheels kicked up gouts of fiery sand as the machine began to crawl across the dunes. The servant girl toppled forward slightly and fell against Fitz’s sore leg.

‘I thought you were told to look after me,’ he gasped.

She smiled and raised her hands in apology.

‘It’s all right,’ he said, feeling a little sorry for her. Probably shy, poor lass.

Not used to alien men around the place, especially not ones carrying nasty injuries like this. ‘I don’t bite,’ he added. ‘I just get bitten.’

This time her lips parted slightly, revealing the tips of very white teeth. Fitz returned the smile. ‘So. What now? Bandages? Tourniquet? Amputation?’

‘She cannot speak,’ said a gruff voice from behind him. Fitz jumped and turned to see Brevus bending down to join them beneath the rigging.

‘Oh,’ said Fitz, feeling awkward. He wanted to ask, ‘Why not?’ but thought better of it. He settled for aiming an embarrassed smile at the girl and quickly changed the subject. ‘Gosh, is that the ice mine?’ Fitz pointed at what obviously was the ice mine, now visible as the caterpillar-car wheeled around and headed away. The tower’s shadow stretched for hundreds of yards across the sand, and the tower itself glinted majestically in the sunlight. Only now did Fitz realise that the sun was quite low in the sky, and a horrible thought struck 23

him: If it’s this hot in the evening around here, what’s it like in the middle of the day?

Brevus was looking at the ice mine with an unreadable expression.

Fitz took the opportunity to have a closer look at his features. He definitely reminded him of someone.

Or something.

Yes, that was it. Seeing Brevus against the desert backdrop clinched it. He reminded Fitz of a camel. The same-coloured fur, the heavily lidded brown eyes, and bony nose. Flat nostrils. Heck, I'm on the planet of the camel-people.

The girl began to gently unwrap the Doctor's blood-soaked cravat from around Fitz's leg.

'Um, what's her name?' asked Fitz.

She didn't even look up.

'She doesn't have a name,' Brevus said, as if the question were, if not exactly stupid, then somewhat out of place.

'Why not?'

Brevus blinked his big camel eyes. 'She doesn't need one. She has no family.'

'Oh,' said Fitz. He looked back at the girl and noticed, for the first time, that her clothes were very much poorer than those of Brevus. His appeared simple and lightweight at first glance, but were soft, generously folded, and properly hemmed. By contrast, the girl's were merely scraps of fraying material loosely stitched together and hung around her body. Her feet were covered with rags.

She's no servant, thought Fitz. She's a slave.

Clean bandages were applied to Fitz's leg. It didn't look as bad as Fitz now hoped it would, but the flesh was puffy around the series of random puncture marks and extremely tender. As soon as the slave girl had finished, she packed up her things and disappeared, presumably below decks, if this thing had them.

Fitz shifted his weight as well as he could; his backside was going numb and the constant undulating sway of the caterpillar-car was making him feel sick. He thought about lighting up a cigarette to take his mind off things, only to find that the Doctor still had his Zippo.

His leg was starting to ache in earnest now, as well. It was a deep,

ragging throb in the middle of his calf that was trying to take all his attention. Why didn't the Doctor carry an aspirin in those pockets of his? Why was it just bits of useless junk and old sweets?

And a Zippo cigarette lighter.

'You did not mean to come here, did you?' Brevus said to him. 'To Eskon.'

Fitz allowed himself a tight smile. 'You said it. Next time I want a suntan, I'll put it on with a lamp.'

24

'Then why did you come?'

'Not my decision, chum.' Fitz wanted to leave it at that, to continue playing the taciturn stranger, but really he needed a cigarette to carry that off with any success. After a pause, he continued: 'The navigational system on our, um, spaceship, cocked up. Not entirely sure why we ended up here, though.'

Just lucky, I guess.' The sarcasm was lost on Brevus, however. It never failed to amaze Fitz how few aliens appreciated the lowest form of wit. Sometimes he felt sorry for them.

An age-old compulsion to elaborate on his story made Fitz say, 'We lost our ship in orbit due to engine failure. Er, one of the, um, mercury links blew in the interstitial phase magnetron Artron hoover booster. Rotary arm fell off, I think.' Whoops! Not too elaborate, you dope! 'We, er, parachuted down here.'

'Are you three the only crew?' asked Brevus.

'Er, yeah. Compassion's the pilot. The other bloke is the Doctor. . . '

'And you must be the captain?'

'That's right.' Fitz smiled again. 'Space Captain Kreiner, at your service.'

As he spoke, two more figures ducked beneath the canvas and joined them.

It was Compassion and the Doctor, now in his shirtsleeves. 'Feeling any better *Captain Kreiner*?' he asked.

Fitz smiled self-consciously and nodded. The Doctor didn't seem to notice his discomfiture, however, and merely clapped him on the shoulder, saying,

'Good, good. We've been admiring the scenery, haven't we, Compassion?'

Compassion nodded.

'Interesting terrain,' the Doctor continued. His normally water-blue eyes were turned a peculiar violet colour by the light of the setting sun.

Fitz said, 'It's just a desert.'

'Is the whole planet like this?' the Doctor asked Brevus.

'As far as anyone knows, yes,' Brevus replied. He sounded a little sad about it, almost bitter.

'Hence the ice mine,' said the Doctor. 'Water must be pretty scarce around here. It must be at least fifty degrees Celsius in the shade. That's a hundred and twenty-two degrees Fahrenheit to you, Fitz.'

'I can feel every degree. How do you people live here?'

Brevus frowned. 'Where else is there?'

'You could try another planet.'

'We do not have the means for space travel.'

'Yet you're not surprised to see us here?'

'Aliens have come to Eskon before. Usually they are seeking to trade with us. When they realise that we have nothing to offer them, they leave.'

'You're lucky. There's some aliens out there who'd wipe you out as soon as look at you.'

25

'Fitz!' the Doctor sounded scandalised.

'What? It's true.'

‘Not everyone in the universe is bent on galactic domination. There are some peaceful trading races out there as well.’ Both Fitz and Compassion looked somewhat sceptical, and the Doctor felt he had to support his claim with a second argument. ‘Besides, Eskon may be a long way from the busier star systems.’

‘Back end of nowhere, you mean,’ muttered Fitz.

The Doctor gave him a what’s-the-matter-with-you? look and turned back to Brevus, smiling. ‘Take no notice. We were just admiring your desert. I expect it gets cold at night, with no cloud cover to prevent the heat radiating back into the atmosphere?’

‘It can grow cooler, certainly. But it stays warm until sunrise. Don’t worry, we shall reach Baktan before darkfall.’

Instinctively, they all turned to look ahead of the sandcar, to see if the city was visible yet. Vast swathes of cinnamon desert separated them from a shimmering horizon broken only by distant, monolithic rock structures.

‘Compassion ran a geological scan of the area,’ said the Doctor, as if this would be fascinating small talk. ‘The red colour of the sand is caused by a high iron oxide content, as you’d expect. It’s mostly quartz bound together by silica and calcium carbonates. I imagine there must be some spectacular sandstone rock formations around.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Brevus. ‘You will see more when we approach Baktan.’

‘You’ve missed out the interesting bit,’ Compassion told the Doctor. ‘About the geological faults.’

‘Well, those are present in the geology of most planets, Compassion.’

‘So are deserts.’ Compassion turned to Brevus. ‘Do you realise that the mining of the ice fields below the rock stratum is weakening the tectonic structure?’

‘Compassion, it’s rude to criticise your host’s planetary tectonics. Brevus, take no notice of her. Compassion is always looking for trouble. I prefer to take things as they come.’ Ignoring the derisive snorts from both his companions, the Doctor shifted his sharp gaze forward of the sandcar’s bows once again. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. ‘Is that Baktan?’

The car had topped a rise in the sandy terrain that could have been a

giant dune. From its peak, the desert floor spread out before them before falling away into a massive canyon, its depths hidden for the moment by the heat haze. Along the canyon's edge were a number of huge rock formations that reminded Fitz of the scenery he used to marvel at in Westerns. The mammoth granite towers must have been carved from the desert rock by centuries of 26

wind, and were truly spectacular. Each displayed the peculiar striping of different geological strata, and some appeared to be flecked with little notches of black.

But, for the life of him, Fitz couldn't see any city.

'It's there,' said the Doctor, pointing. 'Look at that tower.'

Fitz stared at the monolithic rock in question, and, quite suddenly, he saw the city.

It was the monolithic rock.

The black marks were windows; the rigidly geometric lines were the edges of walls and floors built into the actual stone.

As they grew closer, he realised that the city had not been built so much as carved out of the sandstone - layer upon layer of hollowed-out rooms and chambers, passages and wide-open spaces too, supported by rows of columns and elegant causeways.

Then the scale of the edifice finally hit home. The rock towered above them, like some strange fusion of natural skyscrapers, all glowing an incandescent orange in the light reflected from the desert sands. And, as the dusk crept onward, lights started to appear in the windows, tiny little jewels glimmering in the darkening walls.

'That's fantastic,' Fitz said eventually, his earlier cynicism washed away by the overpowering sight. He'd even forgotten the pain in his leg, and his voice was barely a whisper. Even Compassion seemed moved, murmuring, 'It is impressive.'

The Doctor looked on in silence as the sandcar wound its way closer to the base of the city. Eventually it dominated their vision, filling land and sky.

Gradually, insect-like, the sandcar entered the lengthening shadow of the vast monolith.

Chapter Five

Baktan

‘This is intolerable,’ said Anavolus. ‘He’s gone too far, this time. A call to Forum cannot be ignored.’

He turned away from the long window, nostrils flaring as he gave a furious sniff to emphasise his feelings on the matter. But Anavolus was an old man by anyone’s standards, and the sudden inhalation sparked off a series of asthmatic coughs.

He shuffled over to the high-backed chair where he usually sat at Forums and leaned against it heavily. On the opposite side of the circular room were another two chairs of identical design, but only one of them was occupied.

Old Krumm was even more ancient than Anavolus. His skin had lost most of its fur, save for a crown of bedraggled white strands hanging from his head and chin. His once bright eyes were half blind with cataracts, which may be why he kept them closed most of the time. Now, however, Anavolus caught the merest glimmer of light between the heavily folded lids as Old Krumm woke up.

‘Who?’ he asked in a voice that wore its age like a cracked mantle.

Anavolus coughed and snorted a little more. ‘Why, Grymna of course!’

‘You mean *Tor* Grymna,’ said Old Krumm, closing his eyes again. ‘He’s a *priest* now, remember. Renounced his family and all that.’

Anavolus whacked the back of his chair with a gnarled fist in frustration.

Tor Grymna, the third – and, arguably, most vital – member of the Forum had ignored a direct summons. Again. What was the man thinking of? There were so many important matters of state to be discussed and acted upon. Didn’t he care?

Anavolus hobbled back to the window again, belatedly realising that he’d left his stick there. The evening sun hammered through the coloured glass and flung rays of light – red, orange and purple – across the Forum chamber floor. Once, a long time ago, Anavolus had considered it beautiful. Now it made him feel ill.

The view was still good, though, from up here. The Forum chamber was situated near the top of the city, allowing visitors an aerial view of the Great Dryness. From here, Anavolus could see the sandflats that surrounded this 29

area, the edge of the escarpment, and, in the distance, the Arid Mountains.

Now that the temperature had dropped, slightly, with the approach of dusk, you could just make out the peaks over the shimmering heat haze. None of those peaks were snow-tipped. No water had run down those empty mountain streams for generations. All that remained were the ghosts of rivers, dry cracks in the parched land full of nothing but sand and dust and, occasionally, the bones of some poor creature unable to withstand the sun's merciless attention any longer.

Anavolus raised his eyes to the sky, which was now the colour of running blood. When the sun finally turned its burning stare to the far side of the planet, the stars would gradually become visible from here. Anavolus liked looking at the stars. Somehow, they seemed to offer hope – small and distant, but brightly shining nonetheless.

‘He’ll come soon enough,’ wheezed Old Krumm suddenly. ‘Tor Grymna, I mean.’

‘By that time, we’ll all have dried up and blown away,’ Anavolus grumbled, rapping his stick against the floor with a resounded crack. He watched Old Krumm shifting in his chair, almost like an old bedcover settling on its mattress, and decided to press home his advantage while the man was still conscious. ‘We must reach a decision on this quarantine policy,’ he said, making no effort to hide his disgust at the final two words. ‘The other cities are putting us in an untenable position. All the established trade routes have been diverted through the Dune Gorge, for grief’s sake! They’ll starve us all to death at this rate.’

Old Krumm raised a skeletal hand to stroke the remains of his beard. ‘They won’t want to chance the Drech Canyon too often,’ he murmured. ‘And they can’t avoid it if they stick to the Dune Gorge.’

‘I’m not prepared to bet my life on that,’ retorted Anavolus sharply. ‘Or the lives of everyone in Baktan.’

‘Don’t worry. It won’t last.’

Anavolus turned to look back out at the desert, irritated by Old

Krumm's lack of concern. It was too easy not to care when you were that old, he supposed. But Anavolus still had a way to go before he died, and he wanted to see an end to this problem first.

But he couldn't do it on his own.

'We need Tor Grymna,' he said, this time with only a weary sigh. 'We need his insight, his strength. His resourcefulness.'

But Old Krumm had closed his eyes again. Perhaps he was already asleep, because he made no reply.

Tor Grymna did have important matters to attend, reflected Anavolus, and other commitments, it was true. Since the collapse of his family group, Tor 30

Grymna had immersed himself totally in the state affairs of Baktan, and carved a single-minded path through the day-to-day problems of a city this size.

He had even earned a reputation as a formidable and respected politician throughout a number of the neighbouring cities of this part of Eskon. If anyone could find a way around the ostracisation of Baktan by the other city-states of Eskon, it was Tor Grymna. He was the most popular member of the Forum despite his familial disintegration, and would one day replace Anavolus as leader. A successful resolution of the current crisis would assure him of that particular ambition, no doubt, but Anavolus bore him no malice. He was too old and tired.

So thinking, Anavolus walked back to his chair and sat down with a grateful hiss. Old Krumm was snoring softly into his whiskers.

The Forum chamber doors opened and a messenger came in, a worried frown on his young face.

'My Lord,' he said, remembering to stop and bow only at the last second.

He clearly had urgent news, which always made Anavolus's heart sink.

'What is it?'

'Another disturbance, My Lord.'

'The slimers again?'

‘Yes, My Lord.’

Anavolus sighed. As if they didn’t have enough problems already.

Baktan city rose from the desert like a clenched fist held in salute; at its highest point the sandstone was a bulbous lump, supported by a thick wrist shaped over millions of years by the constant erosion of winds passing over the Great Dryness from the west. The stone was strong but easily carved, allowing the native Eskoni to burrow into its cool interior and virtually hollow out the massive rock formation. Thus could a solid block of granite become home to several hundred thousand people. Some might liken the process to termites inhabiting their mound of soil, but Baktan city was carved by beings with a flair for architecture and elegant design. Fluted columns lined its passages and cloisters; entire colonnades fronted wide halls and mezzanines.

‘This really is marvellous,’ said the Doctor, buzzing with joy at a new place to visit. ‘An entire city, self-contained in one giant rock!’

‘It must be like living in a cave,’ observed Compassion with markedly less enthusiasm.

‘Yes, yes, exactly.’ The Doctor nodded his head rapidly. ‘That’s precisely what I meant. I’ll bet the Eskoni simply never grew out of living in caves.’

And, in a hot desert climate like this, a nice cool cave is just the place to be.’

‘We have always lived in places like this,’ Brevus confirmed. ‘The oldest parts of Baktan date back several thousand years.’

31

‘Do they really?’

Fitz pulled a face as he silently mimicked ‘Do they really?’ at Compassion.

She almost smiled.

‘I regret, however, that before you can enjoy the true beauty of Baktan, we must first traverse the. . . outer settlement,’ said Brevus.

Frowning, the Doctor turned his attention to what he had assumed, from a distance, to be some kind of open-air market at the base of the

city. On closer inspection, however, he saw that where the monolith met the edge of a shallow escarpment and the desert sands blew in great hot drifts against the entrance ramps and arches, another society had constructed its own dwelling place.

This was an entirely shabbier affair, consisting primarily of roughly made shelters and loose, shapeless tents stretching over many meters. Narrow, twisting alleys ran through the habitation like the paths of worms in the ground. The people who lived here dressed in rags and thick cloaks matted with filth and grease. Rising from the cluttered streets on the warm air was the odour of many beings living too close together in squalor – an unmistakable cocktail of rotting food, sweat and ordure.

From his position on the sandcar as it pushed its way through the thick artery that led to Baktan city proper, the Doctor stood transfixed. In this strange sunlight his profile looked as though it were hewn from the same rock as the city. The Doctor's lips were pursed, the generous upper lip protruding in an almost petulant fashion as he surveyed the shantytown.

‘Slimers,’ said Brevus as he stood next to him.

The Doctor snapped from his reverie. ‘I beg your pardon?’

Brevus pointed at the bent figures congregating in their blackened rags at the roadside. ‘Thieves and parasites,’ he muttered with distaste. ‘Monsters even. We call them slimers.’

‘Why?’ asked Compassion,

Brevus looked at her. ‘Let’s just say you wouldn’t want to look too closely under those rags.’

‘Where have they come from?’ asked the Doctor.

‘The bowels of the desert as far as I’m concerned,’ spat Brevus. ‘They’ve no right to pitch camp here. They should go out into the desert and find their own place to live.’

The Doctor said nothing, but a look of dismay had settled on his face now where before there had only been excitement.

I’m truly sorry you have had to witness all this,’ Brevus said as the sandcar made its way forward. ‘Once we are in the city proper, you won’t see it again.’

‘Don’t count on it,’ murmured Fitz.

32

The sandcar lurched to a halt, pitching its passengers forward with no warning. Fitz wheezed and groaned as he was forced to put more weight on his injured leg.

‘What’s up?’

‘Some sort of disturbance up ahead,’ said Compassion.

It was a riot, or something trying very hard to be a riot. About twenty or thirty slimers were gathered in front of a pair of elaborate gates which stood at the foot of a long, wide ramp leading up into the city itself. The slimers were blocking the sandcar’s path, and seemed to be quite agitated. Fitz could hear hostile voices raised in anger, although he couldn’t tell what was being said.

Then there were some shouts, harsh aggressive cries that carried easily on the warm evening air.

‘It’s a scrap,’ realised Fitz, levering himself up for a better view. ‘Someone’s putting the boot in, anyway.’

A group of figures dressed in sand-coloured robes had appeared by the gates. A few of them carried long wooden staves, which they were using to beat back the slimers. For several seconds the occupants of the sandcar watched in silence as the batons rose and fell, and the shanty-dwellers were gradually forced back.

‘Bandits,’ said Brevus bitterly. ‘Murderers too, some of them. They’re being treated lightly for this.’

One slimer had stumbled and fallen to its knees. Two city guards pushed forward and set about the recumbent figure with their staves. Even from here the occupants of the sandcar could discern the heavy thwack! of each blow.

The Doctor tensed, his hands forming powerful fists.

Fitz reached out and laid a hand on his arm. ‘We don’t know the full story, Doc,’ he warned. ‘Stay cool.’

‘It’s two against one,’ the Doctor complained. ‘And they’re armed.’

But then a number of the slimer’s comrades moved in, ferociously

attacking the guards and dragging the injured party away. On the sandcar, one of Brevus's men joined them. He looked younger and fitter than Brevus, and wore garments similar in design to those of the city guards. Fitz noticed also that he held a handbow, cocked and loaded.

'Trouble?' he asked Brevus.

'Aim for the leader, Zela,' ordered Brevus without preamble.

Before anyone could stop him, Zela raised the handbow and pulled the trigger. Immediately one of the slimers jerked backwards, the tip of a small metal arrow clearly visible as it protruded from its ragged cloak.

'Ouch,' sympathised Fitz, not certain whether to be appalled or impressed by Zela's finely aimed shot.

33

'Was that really necessary?' asked the Doctor hotly, but Brevus was unmoved.

'Don't worry, it takes more than that to hurt a slimer.'

The slimer in question grabbed at the bolt and pulled it free of its shoulder with no more than an angry snarl.

'Strewth,' said Fitz. 'Tough little brutes, aren't they?'

But the shot had given the city Custodians a chance to gain the upper hand and the slimers had been scattered. Someone shouted a command and the sandcar jerked forward, crawling through the city gates and up the entry ramp.

As they passed the little knot of slimers, Fitz glanced down at the leader.

From beneath the heavy grey hood, a pair of white eyes stared back at him.

The surrounding flesh was hidden by the shadow of his cowl, but Fitz had the impression of something thick and glistening. Combined with the unpleasant smell of the place, it made him gag.

The slimer continued to glare after the sandcar as it wound its way on, the handbow bolt clutched in its gloved hand. Within a few seconds the vehicle had passed beneath a massive sandstone arch and into the

cool embrace of the city itself.

The gates clanged shut and the crowd of slimers began slowly to disperse. The individual who had been singled out as the ringleader, and had subsequently taken a handbow bolt in the shoulder for his efforts, remained by the gates for several more minutes. His pale eyes continued to stare at the darkened entrance where the sandcar had disappeared. He was breathing heavily in the long, moist rasps common to all his people.

Presently another figure shambled back and placed a ragged-gloved hand on his large shoulder. He flinched slightly but stood his ground, glaring at the entrance to the city.

‘Leave it, Revan,’ said his companion. ‘You did your best. We all did.’

When Revan spoke, he did so with the characteristically harsh tones of all the slimers. ‘That was nothing, Manag. Nothing.’

‘You were wounded. Ibres was badly beaten.’

Revan turned his blank-eyed gaze on Manag, who recoiled. Revan had the kind of personality that dominated all those around him. Did you hear what they were saying?’ he asked, ignoring Manag’s statement. ‘The guards were trying to say it was a riot. They probably sent a runner all the way up to the Forum with that. Fools!’ He spat the last word quite literally, a sticky glob of sputum that struck the ornate city gates and clung to its metalwork like glue.

Revan turned away from the city and headed back into the thick nest of rough shelters and awnings that made up the slimer settlement. The slimers 34

who had joined him in the fight had all scurried back into their hovels. From some of the darkened recesses he could just about see their blind white eyes staring out at him, almost fearful. Well, they had a lot to fear. It was a poor life out here, hard and exposed to Eskon’s dramatic climate, hated and abused by the people who lived in the city. Condemned to an existence in which survival was the only option, swathed in protective rags, huddled together like a clutch of newly hatched dryth lizards.

There were hundreds of them here, and, out of all of them, there was only Revan who was prepared to do anything about it.

As he moved through the twisting paths between the tents and lean-

tos, Revan suddenly reached out and wrapped a powerful hand around Manag's arm. Like those of all the slimers, Revan's hands were reduced to little more than paws.

'I've had enough of this, Manag,' he hissed. 'I'm not going to sit out here and die like some sort of starving rodent.'

A young slimer came running up and nearly crashed straight into Manag.

Regaining his feet, he gasped, 'Revan! Manag! Come quickly! Ibres is ill.'

Revan and Manag exchanged a look of some apprehension. 'Is it the Squirming, Hefeg?'

Hefeg's eyes opened wide in fear. 'It must be! They say it's because of the beating he took from the guards.'

Hefeg turned on his heel and ran off into the jumble of shelters, leaving Manag to turn angrily on Revan. 'A beating he took for you, Revan!' he said accusingly.

Revan glowered back at him, his lips drawing back from a cavernous mouth with a horrible sucking noise. 'Ibres was already ill. He didn't have to take part.

'Ill?' repeated Manag. 'Revan, if it *is* the Squirming –'

Revan's paw shot out and grasped Manag by the collar of his hood, drawing him closer. 'If it's the Squirming, then he's already dead. And that will be one more death on the conscience of the Forum!'

He pushed Manag away with enough force to send him sprawling in the dirt, and walked away.

35

Chapter Six

Challenges

'Oh yes. . . that feels *much* better,' said Fitz.

He lay back on the bed and let his aching body relax properly for the first time in. . . how many days? He'd lost count. Possibly weeks.

‘Don’t stop,’ he murmured, flinging a lazy arm across his brow. ‘That’s marvellous. You’re a gifted nurse, y’know.’

He called her his nurse, but it was actually the native girl who had first tended to him on the sandcar. She still hadn’t said a word to him, but she certainly knew how to treat knivor bites.

First, he had been encouraged to change out of his own clothes into some sort of native gear – a bit like a short bathrobe made out of cotton or something similar. It was loose and cool, although Fitz felt a little vulnerable without his customary jeans and leather jacket.

Then, the Eskoni bandage had been gently removed, its blood-caked remains discarded.

Fitz’s swollen calf was then bathed with a solution of some blue-tinged liquid, which stung very slightly whenever it ran into the teeth marks left by the knivor. To Fitz, these puncture wounds were disappointingly small, and with the blood washed away there was actually very little damage.

The girl had then sprinkled a fine grey powder over the whole area, which probably acted as some kind of localised anaesthetic as well as disinfectant, because minutes later the pain simply evaporated and left Fitz in a miasma of complete carelessness. Or maybe it was something more than just a painkiller, he mused dreamily.

‘You have healing hands,’ he mumbled. For a few minutes he just moaned softly into the slim piece of padding the Eskoni called a pillow.

Baktan was certainly a beautiful city. They had left the sandcar in a cool garage space at the bottom of the massive edifice and then followed Brevus through the lower levels of the city on foot. He seemed understandably proud as he showed off the long, low plantation hangars full of crops that resembled barley and vegetables. Huge angled sunscreens reflected the light into the hangars from outside the city. Water piped under the desert from the ice mine was fed into the soil, and the rest of the city, via an ingenious system 37

of irrigation pumps. There were farms too, breeding livestock – creatures resembling huge furry cows, and other things that were more like sheep or chickens.

They saw more of the people who lived in Baktan as they were taken up through the higher levels using quiet, elegant escalators. The

Eskoni people

– mostly men: there were very few females in evidence – moved around with apparent contentment. Fitz wasn't surprised. It looked like a great place to live, considering the hostile climate outside, and he was certainly happy with the nursing arrangements.

Eventually, the first clammy fingers of guilt did creep through his hedonistic doze and Fitz sat up with a grateful sigh. 'All right, that's enough.' He smiled as he said it, to show that he was happy with things as they were. She stared back at him with eyes like Bambi's mother.

'Can you talk?' he asked bluntly. 'I mean, is it that you can't, or don't?'

Her only response was a slight frown.

'Do you really not have a name?' Fitz asked her again. 'Mine's Fitz. *Fitz.*'

There was no response.

'Well, you need a name. The only man I know who doesn't have a name at least uses a title.' Fitz stared into her eyes again for a long moment. 'So, I'm going to call you Florence.'

She simply smiled back at him in reply.

The Doctor was pleased to find that Baktan city grew noticeably cooler as the evening drew on, cool enough for him to be able to wear his velvet jacket comfortably at least. He paused by one of the passage windows and examined his reflection in the darkening glass. It was so confusing looking younger as you grew older. Centuries ago, he had looked like an old man with white hair. Now, well past his one thousandth birthday, he looked barely middle-aged – by human standards, he reminded himself. It was funny how easily he could judge things by human standards. Almost without thinking about it, sometimes.

Either way, there was a raffish lack of care about the tangle of long brown hair that sprouted from the top of his head and fell down behind his collar.

The effect was accentuated now by the casual open neck of his wing-collared shirt, and he pondered the suitability of meeting the Baktan

leaders without a cravat. But then again, he hadn't noticed much in the way of formal neckwear on Eskon so far. Straightening his gold-threaded waistcoat, he turned away from the glass and nearly bumped into Compassion.

'Admiring the view?' she enquired with a raised eyebrow.

'I was just thinking,' he replied hastily, a little concerned by the ease with which she had crept up on him. She had managed to avoid appearing as a 38

reflection in the window, too. 'We must be on the very fringes of this galaxy.

When it gets darker, you should be able to see the complete galactic ellipse.'

In the evening sky the first stars of the night could clearly be seen, gathered all together in an impressive arc. 'Any idea which galaxy?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not from this angle, at least. I'm afraid we're completely lost.'

'That bothers you?'

'Oh no.' He smiled. 'I rather like it. Sometimes it's nice to go somewhere where nobody knows who you are, or what you are.'

'I think I know what you mean.'

For a few minutes they both stared up at the night sky. A tiny blinking light on the shadowy horizon caught the Doctor's attention. He pointed it out to Compassion.

'That's the ice-mine tower,' he said.

Compassion looked at him. 'What about it?'

He shrugged. 'I'm not sure. I was just thinking about when we first arrived.

That scream in the cave.'

'You think it really was someone screaming? Not just the knivors?'

His eyes had narrowed, concentrating on the distant lights as they winked into the darkness. 'I don't know. Possibly. Isn't that enough?'

‘For what?’

‘For me to want to find out. There’s something going on here, Compassion.

I can sense it.’

‘You can’t rest, can you? You’ve always got to go digging in the dirt for problems.’

Surprisingly, he smiled at this. But it was a humourless smile. ‘Yes, it might come to that,’ he murmured. Suddenly he snapped out of his reverie and turned to look directly at her. ‘Anyway, enough of all that. Here comes our host!’

Compassion turned to see Brevus, who now wore a more formalised version of his desert robes trimmed in bronze, walk around the nearby corner. He greeted them with a polite smile and asked if their rooms were adequate.

They thanked him for his generosity in providing them with quarters in one of the most well-appointed parts of Baktan city, but he assured them that it was only what they were due. ‘Alien visitors to our planet are rare, and should be afforded every hospitality. Those are the exact instructions of my leaders, the city Forum.’

He ushered them into a wider passageway leading into the centre of the rock. There were no more windows, but the corridor was lit with thoughtfully placed lamps that gave off a soft creamy glow.

39

‘It is most regrettable’, Brevus continued gravely, ‘that you should be forced to witness such an unnecessary disturbance on your way into Baktan, especially after your ordeal in the caves. We should be able to offer you every courtesy and absolute safety, but. . .’

‘Nothing is ever straightforward, is it?’ commented the Doctor.

‘The slimers are a continual nuisance,’ confessed Brevus resignedly as he led them into a wide, high-ceilinged passageway. ‘They are aggressive by nature, parasitic by choice and violent if they get the chance. We have tried reasoning with them, ignoring them – even driving them out by force. But nothing works.’

‘Can’t your Forum do anything about them?’ asked Compassion.

‘The Forum does its best, but in truth it is kept busy with other more pressing matters. The slimer problem has been relegated to a nuisance that we must live with, at least for the time being.’

‘You have more pressing problems?’ enquired the Doctor.

‘You needn’t concern yourself with those, Doctor,’ Brevus said by way of smoothly deflecting the question. ‘While you stay in Baktan, you are to be made welcome on the planet Eskon. You must be a very long way from your homeworld. . . ’

‘Homeworlds,’ corrected Compassion.

‘. . . and tired after your parachute jump.’

‘Er. . . ?’ said the Doctor.

‘Captain Kreiner described your emergency landing earlier,’ explained Brevus. ‘It sounded very exciting. Although I confess that I still can’t see how you managed to then lose yourselves in the ice-mine caves.’

‘Neither can we,’ said Compassion dryly.

Brevus guided them on to a concourse busy with Eskoni people going about their business of the evening, which appeared to be a market. Many robed figures, some in tall elaborate headgear, perused the series of stalls set in a wide circle in the middle of the square. Most of the market stalls were serving drinks – or at least some kind of bottled liquids. The hum of general conversation and the excited chatter of bartering filled the hall.

‘What’s this?’ wondered Compassion. ‘A bar?’

‘One of Baktan’s water bazaars, yes,’ confirmed Brevus. ‘People come here to trade in fluids.’

‘Fitz will be quite at home, then.’

‘Fluids?’ prompted the Doctor.

‘As you know, water is very rare on Eskon. That makes it a valuable commodity.’

‘And Baktan operates a free-trade economy?’ the Doctor seemed a little disconcerted by this. ‘Where water is a means of profit?’

Brevus smiled grimly. 'I think I understand now what you mean, Doctor. But I can assure you that no one here makes a profit from the misery of drought.'

We leave that to the alien traders who try to exploit our situation for their own benefit.'

'All right,' conceded the Doctor. 'Point taken. But in my experience, someone always comes out on top in situations like this.'

'No one *owns* any water on Eskon, Doctor. The ice mines are not profit-making. They are a public facility paid for by taxes. But the water they produce *is* rationed, simply because there isn't enough to go around. The citizens can use the water they are allowed in any way that they wish, however. And if that means they want to buy and sell their share, or make other things from it, then they are free to do so.'

'You seem to have it all worked out nicely,' commented the Doctor. 'Very civilised, in fact.'

Compassion could tell that the Doctor wanted to say more. She thought back to his remarks about the ice mine and his gut feeling that something was up.

They passed the water market and rode an escalator up to the next level.

The Eskoni carried themselves with a natural haughtiness not helped by their facial similarity to camels. One or two were walking six-legged reptiles on leads, and the Doctor stopped to make a fuss of one. Compassion expected the lizard to snap his hand off, but within seconds the Doctor had the creature licking dolly mixtures off the palm of his hand. The owner, pleased with the attention his pet was receiving, thanked them profusely as they moved on.

The general decor of Baktan was of a classical style, the natural geometry of which appealed to the Doctor's sense of aesthetic function. Or one of them, at least. The ceilings had been painted with delicate pastel murals, some of which looked to be hundreds of years old, judging by the almost invisible patina of spiderweb cracks across the paint. The Doctor almost got a crick in his neck from examining the fantastically intricate artwork.

In addition to the legacy of the artistic endeavours of the Baktan people, here was evidence of the same kind of technology they had seen at the ice mine: electric lights, public communications

equipment, and escalators and lifts which worked using the same principles of applied static electricity. It was all very civilised, in fact.

Presently they came to a wide arched doorway off a seclude corridor, where Brevus stopped and knocked.

‘Um, wait a sec.’ Fitz’s voice floated from within. Sounds of hurried movement followed, culminating in the swish of heavy material and a distant crash 41

and curse as something was knocked over. A second later the door opened and Fitz poked his head out, looking harassed in the way people do when they don’t wish to appear harassed. ‘Yes?’

‘Hurry up, Fitz,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’re due to meet the Baktan Forum, remember?’

‘Yeah, right. Just give me a minute, will you?’ Fitz popped back out of view, giving Compassion a moment’s glimpse of a small doe-eyed female Eskoni in his room.

‘Is Captain Kreiner all right?’ asked Brevus.

‘I’d say he was fully recovered,’ Compassion replied.

The door opened again and Fitz emerged fastening some kind of belt around the waist of his Eskoni robe. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘Don’t mention it, *Captain*,’ said the Doctor. ‘How’s the leg?’

‘Much better.’ Fitz walked forward with a suddenly pronounced limp. ‘I mean, it still *hurts* like the devil, but –’

‘You’re an example to us all, Captain,’ said Compassion as they all followed Brevus down the corridor.

‘Look, as we’re all in the same boat here, why don’t we just *drop the rank thing now*?’ There was a pleading note in Fitz’s voice now that didn’t become a space captain. ‘Just call me Fitz.’

Is that an order? Sir?’

As they walked past a darkened alcove, none of them saw the tall figure that stepped out of the shadows behind them. Tor Grymna wore a long robe, charcoal-dark, and regarded them severely with oil-coloured eyes beneath prominent brows. His thin lips curled in distaste at the sight of the Doctor and his companions. The tall Eskoni

stood there for several quiet seconds and watched the party until it moved on. Then, with a hiss of suppressed anger, he followed them.

He was already late for the Forum meeting, but that had been deliberate.

What he had not expected was the arrival of these strange offworlders. Doubtless Brevus would be taking the trio of aliens straight to Anavolus and Old Krumm, who would welcome these interlopers with open arms. They were sometimes too gullible for their own good.

But, as with most things in life, Tor Grymna quickly saw a way around the problem. It was important not to see this kind of thing as a setback: there was more to be gained by considering it an opportunity. There were no problems, he believed, only challenges.

And Tor Grymna always rose to a challenge.

42

Chapter Seven

The Inside-Out Planet

It was dark and humid in the tiny hovel Ibres called home; in fact it was no more than a badly concealed hole half dug into the sandy earth beneath the shade of a raised walkway. There were slimers standing on the narrow walkway now, alerted by the commotion; some of them were even sitting down with their legs dangling over the gloomy recess to witness what followed. It wasn't morbid curiosity, merely the urge to be there with their fellow in his final moments. A mark of respect, if that were possible. More were crowded around the entrance as Revan and Manag approached. Revan had to push several of his people aside before he could get close enough to see anything at all.

He heard it first: the long, painful breaths of a dying slimer. The gasps cut through the deathly silence like the slashes of a knife. Somewhere in the murky rectangle of blackness, Ibres lay in mortal agony.

It was the time of the Squirming.

No one had yet been able to explain it satisfactorily, although every slimer knew about it – and dreaded it. The final ignominy.

Manag touched Revan on the shoulder but he barely felt it. 'You don't

have to do this.'

Revan just shook his head. 'Yes, I do.'

The people were watching him, he knew that. Some of them were curious, some of them distrustful. But there were others who expected something from him, something he had promised without even saying a word. That same unspoken pact that Revan shared with the people he called his own brought him here now. Ibres had been one of his. Revan wouldn't let him die alone.

Some of the slimers had started to let out a low, keening moan of despair that had come to mark occasions like these. It was like a cry of the cold wind in the mountains, utterly devoid of warmth or pity – a force of nature. The sound of the lament was more than a sob, less than mourning.

Revan stooped in order to enter the hovel, his eyes slow to adjust to the gloom. He could sense Manag behind him, lurking in the doorway, unable or unwilling to follow.

Ibres lay on a thin mattress of dirt and canvas. The shiny black carapaces 43

of tiny insects glinted in the moonlight as they explored their home, eager to take up residence in Ibres's remains. Revan swatted some of them away with an angry swipe of his paw, and then knelt down.

Ibres's eyes were shut, but they had bulged beneath the glistening skin of his face. His mouth was open as he laboured to breathe, a round black hole in the greyness. His arms were moving feebly at his sides, fingers twitching inside their thick gloves.

Revan tried to talk to him, but there was no response other than a series of jerks and incoherent gurgles. Fear and revulsion welled up in Revan's chest as he watched the Squirming begin.

When the time came, there was nothing he could do except try to hold Ibres down. His body convulsed and twisted in Revan's grip, more powerful in near death than it had been in life. Ibres was young, not very strong, but he had believed in Revan. He had followed him.

And now there was nothing Revan could do to save him, or repay him, except to watch him suffer and give up what miserable existence he had to whatever spiteful god claimed his pathetic soul.

When the end came, it came quickly if not mercifully. With an agonised growl, Ibres shuddered and writhed until his head flew back and his mouth opened in a last, silent scream. Revan closed his eyes tightly so that he didn't have to witness the things that emerged from the thrashing corpse. He could hear them, though: slithering and sucking in the blood than ran down over his hands and wrists and pooled beneath the shaking body.

With a whimper of disgust, Revan finally let go and sat back. In the darkness he could see the tiny, half-formed shapes as they twisted and coiled around each other in a blind frenzy. The lucky ones died very quickly. The others had to be killed one by one; Revan and some of the older slimers dropped rocks on them.

When it was over, Revan stepped out of the hovel and let Manag support him for several long minutes. Neither of them spoke.

The Doctor, Compassion and Fitz were taken by Brevus to a chamber near the very top of the rock, where the cool stone walls were lined with hanging tapestries depicting scenes from Eskon history, and a high roof was supported by pillars decorated with finely inlaid metalwork. Incense burners were dotted around the edge of the room lending an exotic flavour to the air.

Brevus then introduced the Doctor and his companions to the civic leader of Baktan, an older Eskoni called Anavolus.

'We are honoured by your visitation,' he said formally, taking them to a ring of cushions arranged in a wide circle on the floor. Following his lead they sat on the cushions, legs crossed, along with Brevus. 'Not many people come to 44

Eskon any more.' Anavolus carried an ornate walking stick and his sandy fur was streaked with white, particularly around his nose and chin.

A serving girl offered them small drinks from a tray. Fitz didn't care much for sherry, but he took one of the tiny eggcup-like glasses for the sake of politeness. He was amused to find that it contained nothing more than a little water.

'You are very kind,' the Doctor was telling Anavolus, 'to offer us a share of your most precious commodity.'

'Cheers,' said Fitz, downing his in one go. He looked up for a refill, but none was offered. He noticed that the Doctor and Brevus had barely

sipped their own. Compassion hadn't touched hers.

Anavolus smiled. 'It is the very least we can offer. Normally the three Forum members would be here to receive you, but tonight the pleasure falls to me alone. I must apologise on behalf of Forum members Krumm, who is sadly indisposed, and Tor Grymna, who has been unavoidably detained, for their absences.'

'Nevertheless, water must be very scarce on this planet, and your welcome has been most generous.'

Fitz looked again at the empty thimble in his hand.

'We always try to make our visitors from the stars welcome,' said Anavolus.

'I understand you don't get many,' the Doctor remarked.

'Not any more. Mostly offworlders come here intending to trade – but when they see we have nothing to offer but sand, they soon leave' Anavolus smiled at his joke, but it wasn't hard to see that it was close to the truth. He regarded the Doctor with a narrowed eye. 'You are not traders, though. Explorers, perhaps?'

'Something like that, yes.'

'You have the manner of someone who has visited many different worlds, Doctor.'

The Doctor smiled. 'I've seen a few in my time.'

'Have you ever seen a world so withered and barren as Eskon, Doctor?' the old man wondered.

The Doctor smiled politely. 'I've seen some pretty dry planets, yes. Aridius.

Sarn. A terrible world called Dust.' A faraway look had entered the Doctor's eyes, but he banished it with a blink. 'I've been to worlds that are entirely covered by water, though – Ockora. Coralee. Lethe.'

'Incredible,' breathed Anavolus.

Brevus asked if there was much water on the Doctor's own world.

'Less than half the planet's surface,' confessed the Doctor. 'But Earth, where Fitz comes from, is nearly two-thirds water.'

Anavolus and Brevus both looked again at Fitz as if expecting to find he had gills.

‘That sounds fantastic,’ said Brevus.

‘It’s cold and damp,’ said Compassion. The bits I saw, anyway.’

‘You must be very keen to return,’ Brevus remarked without a trace of irony.

‘That could be a problem,’ said Fitz tartly.

‘Fitz means that we are a bit lost,’ apologised the Doctor.

‘Navigational problems, you know.’

‘Then perhaps we can help you,’ suggested Anavolus. ‘Our astronomers have constructed a number of detailed space cartography.’

A brief order to the serving girl brought a series of circular plates that turned out to be reasonably accurate star maps. The Doctor poured over the relatively simple 2-D charts, stroking the images of local constellations and planetary systems with long, sensitive fingers. Fitz heard him muttering things along the lines of, ‘That looks remarkably like Galaxy 152. . . and that is definitely the Tau Graela system. The constellations are unmistakable, from any angle.

We must be on the very edge of the Hhork sector – no wonder you don’t get very many visitors to Eskon.’

‘The Hhork sector is very sparsely populated, and level-nine civilisations are few and far between,’ said Compassion.

‘She means there aren’t many races around here capable of interstellar travel,’ translated the Doctor. ‘I was right: we certainly are off the beaten track.’

There were no more drinks on offer, but Fitz nearly cheered with relief when a serving girl offered around a dish of thin cigars. It seemed the Eskoni enjoyed a long and noble tradition of recreational smoking, although both the Doctor and Compassion declined. Fitz chose one and lit it gratefully from a glowing taper held by the girl. Things were definitely looking up, he thought, taking a long deep

drag.

‘Um, Fitz,’ began the Doctor, trying not to look too anxious. ‘Don’t forget that you have a slightly different metabolism from our hosts. . . ,’

‘Don’t get all heavy on me, Doc,’ mumbled Fitz as he blew out a large ring of purple smoke. ‘I deserve this.’

The star-map plates were cleared away and the serving wench withdrew, leaving Anavolus and Brevus alone with their guests. The Doctor moved the conversation back on to the history of Eskon, and particularly the water shortage.

‘Long ago,’ Anavolus said, ‘Eskon was struck by a rogue solar flare, which robbed the planet of moisture. We survived by living in cities like this, which have afforded us shelter from the sun for as long as anyone can remember.’

46

‘Was Eskon a desert world before the solar flare?’ asked Compassion.

‘Oh yes. There were lakes and rivers, though, and occasional rainfall. But these words are meaningless historical oddities now. After the solar flare, we were forced to look elsewhere for water.’

‘I assume you’ve tried moisture vaporators?’ asked the Doctor.

Anavolus nodded. ‘But with little success. However, we soon discovered a much more plentiful supply of water – underground.’

‘The ice mine,’ Fitz said, feeling as though he ought to contribute something to the conversation, but unable to state anything but the obvious. He was starting to feel a bit dizzy, too.

‘Trapped beneath the surface of Eskon are vast reservoirs of ice,’ explained Anavolus. The ice is kept frozen by the layers of rock insulating it from the heat of the sun.’

‘Extraordinary,’ commented the Doctor. ‘It’s almost as if the whole planet is inside out: a boiling-hot exterior with an ice-cold centre, instead of the opposite way around.’ This obviously appealed to the Doctor’s sense of wonder. ‘What’s at the very core? I doubt it’s a solid block of ice. More probably there’s a tiny molten core balanced against the freezing cold of the surrounding magma.’

Anavolus said, 'Our legends have always held that Eskon's hot surface surrounds a single vast ocean of ice.'

'That sounds more like wishful thinking.' The Doctor smiled.

'Perhaps,' agreed the old man, 'but in the language of our ancient ancestors,

"eskon" means, literally, "cold heart".'

'Perhaps the geological patterns in the rock could tell us something,' suggested Compassion. 'There's evidence of massive tectonic shift. I don't think the ice reservoirs can be very stable.'

'We are merely mining relatively small pockets trapped in the upper magma,' explained Brevus.

'It still must have been a hell of a job to mine it.'

'Yes,' the old man agreed. 'And it continues to prove a difficult process.'

Young Brevus here is one of our leading ice engineers, and, I am proud to say, my eldest nephew.'

'You said there'd been some trouble at the ice mine, Brevus. . . ' prompted the Doctor. His voice was light yet precise; in its own quiet way it dominated the room. Everyone's attention was now on Brevus.

'Trouble?' Anavolus frowned, clearly puzzled.

'There have been some personnel problems at the ice mine,' Brevus confessed. 'One of my men had been sent down to investigate the matter. His name was Graco – a second cousin on my mother's side. He has yet to return.'

47

The Doctor and Compassion exchanged glances. They were both thinking the same thing: the scream in the caves.

Anavolus leaned forward querulously and said, 'I didn't know anything about this, Brevus. What's going on?'

'There have been. . . some technical problems with the deep steam extrac-tors,' Brevus said eventually. 'We're working on it.'

‘Perhaps I could help,’ offered the Doctor. ‘I’m an engineer, among other things. From the little I saw of your ice mine, it’s very impressive. To produce the kinetic energy required to power the extraction mechanism using only static electricity is quite an accomplishment.’

‘I don’t get it,’ protested Fitz. ‘How come you’ve got these static electrissizzy gizmos but still use crossbows?’

‘Fitz, not every culture discovered gunpowder before electricity,’ said Compassion.

‘Gunpowder?’ echoed Brevus.

‘A very primitive explosive used on Fitz’s home planet,’ explained the Doctor. ‘Don’t worry about it. Fitz has been watching too many Clint Eastwood movies.’

Fitz blew another smoke-ring into the air and smiled dreamily. I like these, he mused. A fag and a stiff drink all in one.

‘We do have explosives,’ Brevus was telling the Doctor. ‘They’re used for heavy-duty excavation in the initial stages of setting up an ice mine. We also use a special controlled explosive to help melt the ice when necessary.’

‘Applied thermionics?’ The Doctor sounded impressed. ‘Brevus, your people are much more advanced than you make out.’

‘Not so advanced that we no longer require water,’ said a gruff voice from the door arch. ‘And not so backward that we need the help of aliens.’

The newcomer was tall, statuesque, and clad in a heavy robe the colour of charcoal. His dark eyes burned like pools of oil.

After a moment’s uncomfortable silence, Anavolus said, ‘Doctor, allow me to introduce the third and most valued member of the Forum: my oldest friend, Tor Grymna.’

They looked at the imposing figure standing in the doorway, who returned their stares with complete contempt.

‘Anavolus,’ he rumbled, ‘you have told these strangers too much already.’

‘On the contrary,’ said the Doctor smoothly, ‘I don’t think we’ve been told nearly enough.’

48

Chapter Eight

The Hard Line

Tor Grymna stood in the doorway, practically blocking the wide arch more by his presence than his stature. His short fur was rougher and darker than that of his fellow Eskoni, and his features looked heavier and bonier. He wore his dark mane long and tied back with the usual plaited beads and ornaments, but his thick robes were cut from a material the colour of ashes.

Compassion was already on her feet, alert to any possible threat. Anavolus got up with the aid of his stick and a hand from the Doctor, who also stood.

Fitz followed, although he seemed to have a little difficulty in remaining upright.

‘Tor Grymna!’ said Anavolus, his voice shaking. ‘Whatever is the meaning of this?’

Tor Grymna’s lips drew back slowly from a set of powerful teeth; it was impossible to say whether he was actually smiling. ‘What problems we face, we face alone, Anavolus,’ he boomed. His voice seemed to fill the echoing chamber, and it wasn’t hard to see why Tor Grymna was considered such a formidable member of the Forum. Compassion suspected that he could easily browbeat the rather frail Anavolus into agreeing to anything.

But the old Eskoni was not so easily chastened. He stalked across the chamber, his stick clacking on the marble, and rounded on the taller Tor Grymna with considerable vigour.

‘Tor Grymna, I won’t have this. The Doctor and his friends are my – *our* –

guests and will be treated with due respect!’ Tor Grymna pursed his lips and bowed his head fractionally, as though in mute acknowledgement of the old man’s status. It was clear that he didn’t agree, however, judging by the flare of his nostrils. ‘Furthermore,’ added Anavolus, ‘I think you owe our visitors an apology for the

lateness of your appearance here tonight.'

Compassion took it all back. The old goat still had horns.

Tor Grymna took a deep breath and spoke in saturnine tones: 'Anavolus, you know that I would not normally miss a meeting of the Forum. However, I had pressing matters that required my immediate attention. For that, I am truly sorry.'

Anavolus seemed to soften a little, and placed a hand warmly on Tor
49

Grymna's shoulder. 'I know, I know. But these are testing times for us all, my friend, and we need you here.'

Tor Grymna helped the old Eskoni to walk back to his seat, although Anavolus remained standing. Tor Grymna said, 'I place nothing more highly than my duties on the Forum. But this –' he indicated the ring of cushions and empty water glasses – 'is nothing more than socialising.'

'Nothing wrong with that,' said Fitz, just before he slid to the floor and fell asleep.

Tor Grymna regarded him coolly for a long second before he looked up at the Doctor and Compassion. 'Your colleague has embarrassed you. Perhaps now would be a good time to leave.'

'No,' said the Doctor, 'no no no! We were just starting to enjoy ourselves, weren't we, Compassion?'

'We were?'

'Absolutely. And don't worry about Fitz – he's always like this after a long day. I'm the Doctor, by the way. Pleased to meet you.'

It was clear that the sentiment was not returned as Tor Grymna ignored the Doctor's proffered hand. Instead he turned to Anavolus. 'These people cannot help us. They can't begin to understand the problems we face. It is best for their own sakes, as well as ours, that they leave.'

Anavolus shook his head sadly, and then addressed the Doctor. 'I'm sorry, Doctor. Tor Grymna means well, but he has poor memories of previous visitors to Eskon – traders who were more interested in what they could gain from us than vice versa.'

‘Thieves and bandits,’ growled Tor Grymna. He fixed the Doctor with an accusing glare. ‘Every one of them should be sucked dry and left out in the desert to burn.’

‘That sounds a little harsh.’

‘They wished only to exploit our people!’

‘We space aliens aren’t all bad, you know,’ countered the Doctor. ‘And, if you don’t mind my saying, it’s pretty obvious that you do need some help here.’

‘He speaks the truth, Tor Grymna,’ interjected Anavolus with a trace of irritation. ‘How long can we go on like this? Every day the situation grows worse. More and more towns and cities are refusing to trade with us. Soon all we will have left is visitors from space.’

‘Why are your own people refusing to trade?’ asked the Doctor.

‘The slimers,’ said Anavolus. ‘The problem is getting out of hand. Traders from neighbouring cities are refusing to come here because they fear attack.

Or worse.’

‘Worse?’

‘Infection,’ spat Tor Grymna with disgust.

50

‘You mean Baktan is under quarantine?’

‘It amounts to that, yes,’ agreed Anavolus.

‘Then that settles it,’ the Doctor said with his friendliest grin. ‘Infection, quarantine. . . What you need here is a qualified Doctor.’

Revan stared up at the city with hatred in his eyes.

Baktan towered over him, so high and massive that it reduced Revan and his people to the status of insects – or worse. But it was not just a city, or even a monolithic rock: to Revan it was a fortress. Impregnable. Unassailable.

He’d lived there, once. But time and pain and anger had bleached his memories. He could remember, however, that the important people

lived at the very top, in the rooms with windows. In the darkness, he could see the distant lights of its highest windows twinkling like stars in the night sky. From this angle it meant that he had to look up almost vertically. Lower down, on the more visible levels, he could sometimes see people moving around in the light. He wondered if those people, if they looked out of their precious windows into the darkness beyond, realised that he was there, watching them.

If he listened carefully, he could pick out the sound of the city, but it was difficult over the general hubbub of the shantytown and his hearing wasn't as keen as it once had been. Sometimes all he could hear was the rushing of the blood in his head, the sound of his own fury.

With a sigh he turned away, unable to stare at the city any longer. His eyes stung with the effort; all his senses were dulled, almost as though his physical body was no longer a match for his brain.

Revan coughed and spat out the result. His throat was as clogged with mucus as his eyes were. His breath came in moist, ragged gasps as he sat down next to Manag. They had found a small clearing around which they had placed flickering oil lamps. The darting orange flames gave off an oily smoke.

Ibres was dead. They'd buried his remains in the dirt. Revan could stop thinking about his final moments and the dark things that had come out of his body.

'You're torturing yourself,' Manag said.

Revan gave a derisive snort. 'No. It's them torturing us. But one day I'll make them pay.' His eyes were fixed once again on the lights of Baktan.

They sat in angry silence for several minutes. A small dryth lizard emerged from its hiding place in the sand between Revan's feet and tasted the air with a slender tongue. Perhaps the cloying scent of the oil lamps had woken it.

After watching the dryth for a few minutes, Manag said, 'It's not really their fault, Revan.'

'Of course it's their fault. Who else shuts us out here to live like – like insects?' Revan's voice rattled with emotion. 'They think they know best.'

They think they can keep us down here and treat us like dirt. I've had enough, Manag.'

'But what can you do? Fight?'

'If I have to.' Revan poked the dryth gently with the toe of his foot, and it began to play with the ragged material of his boot.

'But you saw what happened earlier,' argued Manag. 'We can't fight them.

Not properly.'

'Why not?' Revan's temper flared, ignited by the old argument. 'Tor Grymna thinks he's put us in our place, but we outnumber his Custodians ten to one.'

'You won't get everyone to fight for you.'

'I'll get enough. I've already been talking to some of the others.' Revan was serious about it – intense to the point where Manag was almost prepared to believe him. He knew the power of Revan's personality, knew how persuasive he could be. In a different life he might have been a politician, or even a member of the city Forum.

'Anyway,' Revan went on, still playing with the dryth, 'there's no point in an all-out attack. The city's like a fortress and the important people all live at the very top. But there are other ways to get at them.'

'Such as?'

Beneath the rough edge of his hood, Revan's pallid eyes gleamed. 'I could bring the city Forum to its knees in less than a day,' he said softly. 'It's all a matter of being in the right place at the right time.'

'You have a plan?' Manag was surprised despite himself, and felt a thrill of fear coursing through his innards.

'Oh yes,' confirmed Revan. 'I have a plan.'

In his gloved hand he still carried the handbow bolt he had pulled out of his own shoulder only hours earlier. With sudden and astonishing force he drove the tip into the dryth between his feet, skewering it to the earth. It twisted wildly for several seconds before finally slowing

and dying.

Just like Ibres.

Compassion pulled Fitz to his feet and gently gripped his lower lip between the finger and thumb of her left hand. By squeezing and twisting, she succeeded in not only waking him up but also going some way to sobering him.

‘Conkashun! Ot dyo hink you’re doog?’ he yelped. Compassion let go and Fitz staggered backward. ‘That hurt!’

‘Get over it,’ she told him. ‘The Doctor’s on the case.’

He frowned, and followed her out of the reception room into what he assumed was the Forum’s meeting place proper: a wide, circular chamber with a series of tall coloured windows rendered black by the darkness outside. A soft white glow from the frescoed ceiling was focused on the centre of the room, 52

where three large straight-backed chairs faced one another. The Doctor was standing in the middle of the triangle formed by the three chairs arguing with Tor Grymna.

‘The slimers were banned from this city by my order,’ Tor Grymna stated. ‘I cannot help that they choose to live on its doorstep.’

‘Even though it’s nothing more than a shantytown?’ queried the Doctor. ‘All I saw were people living in absolute squalor. They didn’t seem like much of a threat to me.’

‘But you saw them attack us on the way into Baktan,’ Brevus pointed out.

‘No, I didn’t. I saw a skirmish involving a disorganised rabble dressed in rags and some of your armed guards.’ The Doctor was glaring at Tor Grymna, who returned the look with his own burning stare.

‘With respect,’ said Tor Grymna, with anything but, ‘you don’t understand the problem. The slimers are largely disorganised and poorly led, it is true.

But they’re cunning and vicious, and, given any quarter, will attack without mercy?’

‘Rubbish,’ snapped the Doctor. ‘That’s nothing but propaganda. I can

smell it a mile off.'

'You don't know what you're talking about,' scoffed Tor Grymna.

'Not yet,' the Doctor agreed. He sauntered over to the Eskoni and didn't stop until he was standing well inside Tor Grymna's personal space. Tor Grymna stood his ground and glared at him down a long bony nose. The Doctor cocked his head slightly to one side, as if considering something for the first time.

'What are you hiding?' he asked.

'I have nothing to hide from you,' said Tor Grymna quietly. He met the Doctor's gaze without hesitation, although Fitz noticed Anavolus suddenly looking at the floor, as if embarrassed.

'I have taken full responsibility for dealing with the slimer problem,' announced Tor Grymna imperiously. 'The situation is under control. It was the resolution of the city Forum, based on my recommendation, that the slimers be isolated from Baktan. Regrettably, that has meant some hard decisions have had to be made. It is never easy enforcing authority.'

'Enforcing authority?'

the Doctor scoffed, but a thought abruptly cut through his speech. 'Wait wait wait. What you describe is tantamount to ethnic cleansing. Am I missing something here? I thought the slimers were nomads or vagabonds. Refugees, perhaps. Brevus called them bandits.'

'Doctor, I'm afraid you don't fully understand the situation,' said Anavolus soothingly, as he lowered himself stiffly into one of the chairs. The last chair was obviously reserved for Tor Grymna, but he refused to sit. Standing up, he remained a good few inches taller than either the Doctor or Fitz.

53

'You're quite right,' the Doctor sighed impatiently. 'Let's start at the beginning. Who are these people? Why, for instance, are they *called* slimers?'

A look was exchanged between Anavolus and Tor Grymna that spoke volumes for their own separate viewpoints. Then, in a voice heavy with weariness, Anavolus spoke:

‘In the years since the solar flares, and the subsequent climatic changes to our planet, successive generations of Eskoni have been experiencing. . . mutation. It occurs in late childhood, around the time when a young calf might expect to become an adult. There is a loss of body hair, a change in skin texture that none of our biologists have been able to explain. The final result is a kind of secretion from the pores, which covers the entire body in a film of mucus. Hence “slimers”.’

‘In order to keep the Eskoni gene pool clean,’ said Tor Grymna, ‘we have had to take extreme measures. Every slimer is exiled from Baktan. We had not anticipated that they might band together, and form a community outside the city limits.’

The Doctor was looking at them with an expression of dumb horror. ‘You didn’t anticipate. . . ? You sent them out there to die! That shantytown arose because they had nowhere else to go.’ He ran a hand through his tangle of hair in exasperation. ‘A disenfranchised community like that. . . No wonder you’ve got problems. Poverty, disease, resentment and crime – they are all a direct result!’ He glared angrily at Anavolus and Tor Grymna. ‘The problem needs to be investigated and confronted, gentlemen. Not ostracised and ignored!’

His final words echoed loudly around the chamber. Tor Grymna looked shocked, as though he hadn’t expected anyone to raise his voice more than he could. ‘We have done all we can to find the cause of this mutation, Doctor.

We looked for a cure. So far all we can do is contain the problem, and try to prevent its spreading.’

‘You still think it’s some kind of infection, don’t you?’

‘Don’t you?’ asked Anavolus.

The Doctor shook his head irritably. ‘No no no. Can’t be contagious. It’d spread like wildfire in a place like this. You’d all be affected. It’s more likely to be hormonal, or triggered by hormonal changes.’

‘Well, whatever is causing it, Doctor, it is getting worse,’ said Anavolus. He disregarded Tor Grymna’s ‘tsch!’ of annoyance. ‘The rate of mutation is on the increase. Those young Eskoni who do not become slimers are sterile. It is no great exaggeration to say that my people face extinction. And, as if all this were not bad enough, the other Eskoni settlements are now refusing to trade or even visit.’

‘All right,’ said the Doctor eventually, reining in his temper. ‘All right. I’ll investigate the matter myself.’

54

Fitz and Compassion looked at each other and shrugged.

‘There’s something terribly wrong here,’ the Doctor added, ‘and it needs putting right.’

55

Chapter Nine

Agendas

‘I feel awful,’ said Fitz. ‘I don’t mind admitting it. Awful.’

He was sitting on the end of a low, wide bench in the Doctor’s room. The rest of the room – one wall a mosaic, one a large picture window, a high ceiling and lots of artistic pots dotted around the place – was slowly turning around his head.

He held his head in his hands and shut his eyes. Slowly.

‘Hangover,’ said Compassion without a trace of sympathy. ‘I know what’ll help.’

Fitz instantly raised one of his hands to ward her off. ‘Oh no. I know you.’

Any hangover cure you come up with is bound to involve pain.’ He groaned.

‘Anyway, how can I have a hangover from a fag, for heaven’s sake?’

‘I told you,’ said the Doctor. ‘Different metabolism. Whatever weeds formed the basis of that Eskoni tobacco must act as a narcotic to human biochemistry.

Probably raises the levels of encephalins in the brain.’

‘Only you could get scientific about a thick head,’ muttered Fitz.

The Doctor just smiled and continued to stare into the black oval of glass that formed the room’s huge window. In its reflection Fitz could

see that the Time Lord was playing with the antiquated fob watch that hung on a silver chain from his waistcoat pocket. He kept whirling it around his finger, so that the watch spun in an accelerating spiral towards his hand as the chain grew shorter, and then back out again.

‘It’s not just science,’ the Doctor said. ‘It’s magic.’

Fitz frowned irritably. ‘What?’

‘Intoxication,’ said the Doctor, still twirling the fob watch. ‘Inebriation, whatever you want to call it. It needn’t just be caused by ingesting harmful substances. Your own attitude and circumstances can have the same effect.’

‘Oh, don’t tell me you’re one of those people who say “I can get drunk on good company, I don’t need booze”,’ Fitz moaned. Fascinated despite his throbbing head, he squinted at the spinning watch.

The Doctor pursed his lips and shrugged. ‘Please yourself.’

‘I just did,’ said Fitz miserably. ‘Now I’m paying for it.’

57

‘The thing about getting drunk on nothing,’ continued the Doctor blithely, gradually increasing the momentum of the watch until it was nothing more than a flashing gold disc, ‘is that there’s no hangover.’

The watch stopped suddenly as the Doctor whipped the chain in and caught it. For a second he held the watch still, the light from the ceiling lamp catching it so that it flashed brilliantly right in Fitz’s vision. Fitz blinked. When he opened his eyes, the watch was back in its pocket.

And his head felt totally clear.

‘Whu—’

‘Magic,’ whispered the Doctor. ‘Now that we’ve sorted that out, there’s something I want you to do for me.’

It was incredible. The pounding headache, the dizziness – all gone. Zip.

Zilch. For a second Fitz felt a bit odd about that, but then he realised that he did, in fact, feel better than ever. Fitz looked up at the Doctor, smiling faintly.

‘Do I have a choice?’

‘Of course. It’s either that or the hangover.’ He reached for the fob watch again.

‘No!’ cried Fitz dramatically.

Compassion pushed herself off the pillar against which she had been leaning, arms folded. ‘What do you want us to do, Doctor?’

‘A little investigating. If you don’t mind.’

Compassion shrugged. ‘I’ve nothing else to do.’

‘Tor Grymna’s hiding something,’ said the Doctor. ‘I want you to find out what.’

‘What are you going to do?’ Fitz asked suspiciously.

The Doctor stepped closer to the black oval and placed the tips of his fingers against the cool glass. ‘Have you ever seen a big, flat stone and wondered what lives underneath it?’

‘Not often.’

‘I have. And, even though it’s going to be something ugly, I can’t help looking.’

Fitz shivered at the thought and glanced at Compassion, who was just staring at the Doctor’s reflection. In the glass he looked even paler than usual, his angular features imposing.

‘On Gallifrey,’ said the Doctor quietly, ‘there were lots of big stones to look under. Some of them had really nasty things living underneath.’

‘Time-worms, right?’ suggested Fitz. He caught the Doctor’s look and pulled a face. ‘Joke.’

‘Outrageous,’ said Tor Grymna, and he could make even one word fill the entire Forum chamber. It echoed accusingly from the ceiling as Old Krumm 58

shuffled into his seat. He had just returned from a nice, quiet sleep and wasn’t in the mood for Tor Grymna’s infamous temper.

‘What’s going on?’

‘We have aliens in Baktan,’ growled Tor Grymna. ‘Guests by invitation of Anavolus.’

Old Krumm blinked rapidly and struggled to sit up straight. ‘Where?’

‘They’ve drunk our water and smoked our cigarettes,’ Tor Grymna went on.

‘Now they want to cause trouble.’

‘The Doctor only wants to help,’ protested Anavolus. ‘Surely even you can see that!’

Tor Grymna’s dark eyes flashed with anger. ‘Trouble, Anavolus!’ he emphasised. ‘What if he wants to talk to the slimers?’

‘Pardon?’ said Old Krumm, cupping one hand around an ear.

‘It can’t do any harm,’ Anavolus insisted, although he was beginning to sound less certain.

‘Talking to those dogs will only make matters worse!’ Tor Grymna slapped his hand against a marble pillar with a loud clap.

‘Perhaps,’ Anavolus muttered, almost apologetic. ‘But how much worse can things get, Tor Grymna?’

‘Worse?’ echoed Old Krumm.

Tor Grymna’s voice had dropped to a menacing snarl as he leaned against the back of Anavolus’s chair. ‘There’s more at stake here than lost trade and that filth we have living like parasites outside the city wall.’

Anavolus turned to look directly into the burning black eyes of his old friend. ‘Yes, he was perfectly correct, wasn’t he, when he said that you had something to hide?’

With a hiss of anger, Tor Grymna turned on his heel and left the room.

‘Tell you what,’ said Fitz, ‘I’m bloody parched. No chance of a cup of tea here, though, is there, with the water shortage? Did you see those little thimble things they gave us to drink out of?’

The Doctor had picked up a piece of fruit from a basket on the table. ‘Water’s not the problem,’ he said. ‘Those little thimble things were probably symbolic: they couldn’t grow fruit like this without plenty of

water. And that comes direct from the ice mine.'

'Which is where the real problem is?' asked Compassion.

'No, the real problem is no tea,' replied the Doctor absently, taking a bite out of the fruit. It crunched like an apple. 'Not even one solitary tea bag,' he added, fishing in his pocket with his free hand. He tossed a couple of paper sachets down on to the table. Fitz recognised them as a pair of salt and pepper sachets from a motorway service station they had passed through in 1978.

59

'Pity,' Fitz muttered. 'I could murder a cuppa.'

The Doctor smiled wistfully. 'Me too. Something nice and mellow like Rose Pouchong.'

Fitz recalled the days in the Doctor's old TARDIS, sampling all the various tea blends kept in the huge bank of wooden drawers on one side of the console room. The Doctor had liked to start the day with Assam, or China Yunnan, and always insisted on a large pot of lapsang souchong at eleven o'clock, when all the clocks would suddenly start chiming their erratic and slightly unsynchro-nised hour. The Doctor always kept the flavours changing and moving, and never grew bored with it. Even now Fitz could hear the ticking of all those clocks in his memory, and smell the subtle scent of Keemun tea, which they would only ever drink when the old cuckoo clock remembered to chime.

'Mm,' he said, closing his eyes. 'Darjeeling.'

'Mm,' agreed the Doctor appreciatively.

'Can we please stop talking about tea?' snapped Compassion. 'I actually meant the problem with this planet. That's assuming that your real cause for concern isn't its lack of herbal teas.'

'Quite,' agreed the Doctor. 'Fitz, stop wasting our time going on about tea.'

'We've got work to do!'

Brevus stopped at the door to his apartment, suddenly wary for no accountable reason. A dark shadow crept over his shoulder as a tall figure stepped into the light.

‘Tor Grymna!’ gasped Brevus. ‘You startled me.’

Tor Grymna gave the slightest smile. ‘That was not my intention,’ he murmured, without sincerity. His charcoal robes were now fastened at the neck with an ornate metal brooch, and fell to gather at his feet. His bony visage and dark, imperious glare made him look like an emissary of death.

Brevus swallowed hard and stepped away from his door. ‘What can I do for you, sir?’

Tor Grymna gestured calmly with one hand towards the apartment door.

Trembling, Brevus unlocked it and they went inside.

‘I’m told your search for Graco ended in failure,’ Tor Grymna stated without preamble, once they were inside.

Damn Zela to Dallufvir, thought Brevus as he shut and locked the door behind him. I should have known he’d be spying for Tor Grymna. Taking a deep breath, he said, ‘Not entirely. I didn’t have time to check the secondary tunnels. I found the Doctor and his friends instead.’

‘Mm,’ replied Tor Grymna. He was walking slowly around the apartment, apparently more interested in the ornaments dotted around the otherwise simply furnished room. They were all pieces of antiquated mining equipment, 60

mounted on wooden plinths. Some of them had belonged to Brevus’s father; one of the items, an ancient oil lamp, had been given to Brevus as a private gift by his old uncle and tutor. Tor Grymna stopped by the lamp and very gently ran a long, bony finger down its tarnished surface.

‘It is very likely that Graco is now dead,’ Brevus said, feeling the need to expand on his previous statement. He also felt an urge to distract Tor Grymna from his inspection of the antiques. His presence here made Brevus feel dirty.

‘Zela says you think he was attacked and killed by a swarm of knivors.’

‘That is a distinct possibility, sir.’

‘Mm,’ said Tor Grymna again, clearly unconvinced. He continued to trace a line with his finger across the metal of the oil lamp. ‘The same swarm that attacked the alien Doctor and his comrades?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Brevus, it is easy to be impressed by offworlders, especially when they appear as sophisticated as the Doctor and his friends. But we have always chosen a cautious path when dealing with aliens on Eskon.’ Tor Grymna fixed Brevus with a meaningful stare. ‘I’m sure I don’t need to remind you to do the same.’

‘No, Tor Grymna.’

‘We have our problems, it is true. But when all is said and done, that is exactly what they must remain – *our* problems. Do I make myself clear?’

Brevus nodded.

‘Dis must be da place,’ whispered Fitz in his best Jimmy Cagney gangster voice. He was standing outside a high arched doorway at the end of a quiet but ornate passage somewhere near the top of Baktan.

‘Is all your life one long fantasy?’ mused Compassion.

‘What?’

‘You and your role-playing,’ she said, without a smile. ‘Spies, sleuths, cowboys, *space captains*. You’re always pretending you’re someone you’re not.’

‘No I am not!’ Fitz’s embarrassment found just the right tone of indignation.

Compassion shrugged as if she was already bored with the subject. ‘Suit yourself. It’s one way of dealing with it, I suppose.’

Fitz was intrigued despite himself. ‘Dealing with what?’

‘Travelling with the Doctor. You’ve got to admit it isn’t a quiet life. It’s not the sort of thing that I imagine would be your first choice of lifestyle.’

‘Oh yeah? How do you see me, then?’

Again, the half-shrug. ‘Sponging cigarettes and drinks off girls who

ought to know what to expect from a lazy bar-room musician.'

'Oh.'

61

'Sorry, did you think I saw you as a rangy space captain with a laser pistol in one hand and a beautiful woman on the other?'

'Don't be silly, Compassion. Dames just hang on your gun arm.'

Compassion nodded. 'You mean get in the way, right?'

'All the time. They're either falling in love with you or they're getting in the damn way. Sometimes they manage both. Either spells trouble.'

Compassion gave the kind of nod that signified comprehension. 'So which am I?'

Fitz considered this for a moment. 'Compassion, I've never thought of you as a woman.'

He turned away and studied the door again. Behind him, Compassion looked momentarily dumbstruck, as if she were a video image on pause. Then she started moving again, a little frown notched between her eyebrows. 'Let's be quick about this, then,' she said tersely. 'We don't know how long he'll be away.'

Compassion extended a hand towards the door and placed her fingers against the static-electric lock. There was a crack and a spark and the door slid open.

'There you are,' said Compassion. 'In you go.'

Fitz stepped through the arch and then hesitated. 'You're not coming with me?'

'No, thanks. I'll leave you to it. Wouldn't want to get in the way of your aim or anything.'

She walked off, leaving Fitz halfway into the room.

'Hey!' he whispered. 'Come back!'

When Compassion failed to respond, Fitz had no choice but to go into Tor Grymna's apartment alone. It would have been easier with Compassion, but Fitz was determined to do this on his own now.

So, here he was, right in the middle of the enemy's lair – if Tor Grymna was the enemy. All the Doctor had said was that the old goat was hiding something. The Doctor could tell things like that about people; he could guess your phone number just by looking at you. But even Fitz had noticed how jumpy Tor Grymna was – OK, so he was down on the slimers, but there was something else about him that didn't add up. As if he had a hidden agenda. Most politicians do, because they're only people after all. So if it was a private agenda Tor Grymna was hiding, the question was – where would he hide it?

Grinning foolishly at his own joke, Fitz nevertheless began to pace around the room, taking in the desks and chairs, cabinets and other sundry office stuff. The desk had to be the best place to start.

62

There were no drawers, but it took Fitz only a minute to work out that there were sections cut in the surface of the desktop that probably opened up like flaps or the lids on school desks.

There were no handles in evidence, so they were probably spring-latched.

There must be a trigger or something to release them. He began to run his fingers along the underside of the table edge for concealed catches, but there were none.

Now this was irritating, and, worse, he had a sudden urge to scratch his head, which would be the most uncool thing to do in a situation like this.

What he *should* do was hear a faint noise behind him, the soft scuff of a shoe on the carpet perhaps, and then whirl around in a defensive crouch, automatic pistol already in hand.

He had mimed the action without really thinking about it, levelling his index finger at the internal door on the far side of the room, thumb drawn back like a gun hammer. *Pow!*

Or should that have been *zap!* ?

Something moved behind the door.

Fitz jerked backwards in fright, bumping against the desk. Something clicked and four square panels on its surface flipped open, scattering the para-phernalia on top. Fitz whirled, cracking his knee of the edge

of the wood.

Gritting his teeth, he hobbled around the desk and crouched down behind it, breathing heavily.

There was someone already in the apartment!

Who could it be? Tor

Grymna's wife? No, didn't look the type, somehow. Valet? Servant? Yeah, that'd be it: some poor slave girl he used to run his baths and iron his cloaks.

Fitz looked down and saw he was still holding his fingers like a pistol.

Then he heard the main door open, the one Compassion had electrocuted open. From this angle, he was concealed by the desk, but only just. He shrank himself down as far as he could, knees jammed into his cheeks, ribs so tight against his thighs that he could barely breathe.

Someone stepped into the room. Someone tall, wearing a charcoal-coloured cloak.

Tor Grymna.

Hell and damnation, thought Fitz wildly. He was hiding behind the man's desk! And he'd left the flaps open.

63

Chapter Ten

Family Matters

Compassion had nowhere to go, although she could go literally anywhere.

Lately it had become somewhat difficult for her to understand or even follow her own feelings. Mostly she reacted instinctively, which is not ideal when you don't know what your instincts actually are. Sometimes she felt as if she didn't know herself at all, that she was some kind of half-alien impostor.

That made her think of the Doctor, oddly. She didn't really want to see him right now. She doubted that she could stand another of those vaguely inquisitive looks at the moment. She understood that he was

curious, of course, that he wanted to know *all* about her. Her uniqueness attracted his attention. And he desperately wanted to keep her for himself, if only to prove to the other Time Lords that he could always remain one step ahead of them if he had to.

It would be stupid and childish, really, if the stakes weren't so high.

She didn't mind his being so curious, in a way. And he did know a lot about TARDISEs in the normal sense. But she couldn't abide pity – never had done.

She hadn't come from a background that practised intuitive empathy. Didn't really understand it, if she was honest. But, then, neither did the Doctor –

the Time Lords were a pretty hard bunch and the Doctor certainly didn't fit in with them. Perhaps he had absorbed his more sensitive feelings by some kind of mental osmosis after surrounding himself with human beings for hundreds of years. Or maybe he was just some kind of Gallifreyan freak.

But Compassion was different from anything or anyone else anywhere, and that difference had been forced upon her. A complete change of perspective, perception and dimension.

And a randomiser.

She hadn't liked that idea at first. It still rankled. The Doctor had insisted upon it, though, had *forced* it on her. She was now a prisoner of her own inability to navigate. But she had found that travelling through the vortex, feeling the passage of space-time around her and through her, was a glory in itself. She didn't actually care much about destinations. It was the journeying she craved.

So, thought Compassion as she wandered aimlessly through Baktan, and eventually came to a halt by a large picture window overlooking the black 65

desert beyond, a couple of Eskon's low moons and about fifty billion stars.

Any one of those stars might be her next destination, and it really didn't matter which one.

What was to stop her just leaving?

Fitz hadn't breathed for nearly two minutes. He could hear the thunder of blood in his ears. He was still crouched into an impossibly tight foetal ball behind Tor Grymna's desk, with Tor Grymna himself standing about two metres away on the far side. Another step and the old Eskoni, tall as he was, would see the top of Fitz's head.

Very slowly, Fitz let out his breath through teeth clenched so tight he thought he would vomit. A sudden urge to cough developed into a full-blown, jump-up-and-down tickle at the back of his throat. He had to swallow. Had to. Now. Otherwise he was going to choke and cough and splutter in a way that might, just might, attract the attention of someone standing only a few paces away.

He swallowed, and the swallow made a little hard gulping sound. It was almost comical.

But, unbelievably, just as Fitz swallowed, Tor Grymna said, 'Keyhole.'

Or at least it sounded like 'keyhole' to Fitz. He didn't care what it was, only that it had masked his gulp and saved him from discovery. Straining his ears, Fitz listened as Tor Grymna moved around the room. He heard the rustle of his black cloak being removed, and then felt it slap on to his head as Tor Grymna tossed it over the desk. It smelled of old hessian and smoky spices.

'Ckeho?' Tor Grymna's voice rumbled again, a little louder and more distinct. He was calling someone's name, Fitz was certain. Which meant that it probably wasn't a slave girl, as they didn't have names.

'Father?' said a voice from the adjoining room. It was muffled slightly by the connecting door.

So Tor Grymna's son was here! Well, there you go. There must be a Mrs Tor Grymna somewhere. Or at least someone who was this Ckeho kid's mother, Fitz corrected himself.

'Ckeho,' said Tor Grymna's voice with a threatening rumble. 'Has anyone been in here?'

Fitz stiffened.

'I – I don't think so,' said Ckeho's voice.

'Thought I smelled something.'

Hardly surprising, thought Fitz, considering how scared I am right

now.

‘Perhaps it was the slave girl, Father,’ said Ckeho.

‘Perhaps.’ Tor Grymna’s voice grew slightly quieter as he crossed the room and poured a drink for himself. Oddly, he didn’t open the connecting door to 66

Ckeho’s room. ‘It hardly matters. There’s nothing in here of any importance.’

Fitz pulled a face.

‘Least of all you,’ the old Eskoni continued. Now that wasn’t a very paternal tone of voice. Fitz could easily picture the curled lip over those sharp yellow teeth. ‘You have never been anything but a problem for me. An embarrassment.’

‘Father, I have done nothing wrong.’ Ckeho’s voice was not as small or as weak as Fitz had first imagined: rather there was strength of purpose there, almost conviction, which remained at odds with the domineering attitude of his father. Possibly this kid had inherited his father’s straight-talking arrogance. Fitz imagined there must have been some hellish family rows here –

and it looked like another one was starting right now.

‘Nothing wrong?’ snapped Tor Grymna. He turned away from the door and walked back towards the desk, making Fitz cringe again. ‘Everything is wrong. You, this city, the *slimers*. . . ’ He spat out the word like poison. ‘The Forum.’

‘You cannot fight everything,’ warned Ckeho.

‘I will if I have to. With every last drop of water in my body. Anavolus is growing weaker by the day. His resolve is dying along with his body. Krumm might as well be dead already.’

‘Soon the way to the top of the Forum will be open for you, then.’ There was a slightly mocking tone to Ckeho’s voice now.

‘I don’t wish my friends to die,’ Tor Grymna retorted angrily. ‘I love Anavolus like a brother. I would rather *you* died than he.’

‘That I can believe.’

There was an ugly pause here; Fitz felt that both parties might be

regretting the exchange already, but it was too well worn a path for them to stop and apologise now.

‘Father, why do you keep me here? Why can’t you just let me go?’

Tor Grymna’s breath came in a huff of impatience. ‘You know that is impossible. Even now the situation has grown more dangerous than ever. There is someone here in Baktan, an alien – he calls himself the Doctor. He means to cause trouble for all of us. I cannot afford to let that happen.’

‘What more trouble can he cause than we already have?’

‘You sound like Anavolus.’

Anavolus has always spoken wisely, Father. That is why he is the leader of the city Forum and you are not.’ Ckeho’s voice rose slightly on the other side of his door. Fitz got the impression the boy was standing against it. ‘You have never put the interests of Baktan first – you have always served yourself.

People can see that easily enough.’

67

‘You have an insolent mouth, boy. Is it any wonder I keep you where you are?’

‘It cannot be because I am family – not after your renunciation, anyway.

Isn’t a *Tor* supposed to be childless?’

‘I already am.’

‘Why don’t you just kill me and be done with it?’

‘Don’t think I haven’t considered it!’ Tor Grymna was pacing the room again.

Fitz thought it was only the passion of his argument that prevented the old goat from spotting him behind the desk. ‘That would have solved a lot of problems, a long time ago!’

‘Then why not?’

‘Because I *don’t* always serve my own interests first,’ grumbled the

older Eskoni. ‘That is why. The policies I have implemented, and the laws I have enforced, have all been for the greater good of Baktan. We are a city in peril, Ckeho. Perilous decisions have therefore to be made. None of them are easy

– but all are worthy. Something that *you* couldn’t hope to understand.’

‘I would not wish to understand the evil-minded plans you call thought processes,’ retorted Ckeho. ‘What you have done is despicable. The slimers don’t deserve the treatment you have given them.’

Fitz pricked up his ears at this. It looked like the slimers had a champion in Tor Grymna’s son. There was irony in there, somewhere.

Tor Grymna was practically spluttering with fury. ‘Treatment? They’re lucky to be alive, by the moons! I could have had them all slaughtered and buried in the desert. But I gave them a chance for life.’

‘Theirs is not a life. It is an existence.’

‘It is an abomination. They are a blight on our city. They have caused other cities to shun Baktan and cease trading. We are pariahs because of their disgusting presence and diseased breath!’ Tor Grymna’s voice had risen to a thunderous cry ‘I tell you, Ckeho, I am close to ordering their filthy habitation to be torn down and burned.’

‘Slaughter, then.’

‘Yes, if needs be. Something has to be done. It’s not a path I want to take, but I must put the city first. We cannot go on like this.’ Tor Grymna’s footsteps suddenly headed in Fitz’s direction, and the cloak was pulled off the desk with one powerful sweep of his arm. Fitz felt it drag through his hair.

Miraculously, Tor Grymna still didn’t see him. Seconds later the old Eskoni left the room without another word and shut the door behind him. Only then did Fitz let out a long and grateful breath.

Brevus had fallen asleep in his chair, but was woken by a soft tap on his door.

When he opened his eyes, it was to see the Doctor standing in his room, with 68

his back to the door, and the knuckles of one hand gently knocking it.

Brevus sat bolt upright. ‘Doctor! What –’

‘Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you,’ said the Doctor mischievously. The lights had run low in Brevus’s room now and he cut a dark figure against the wall.

As he walked forward, the moonlight shining through the window caught his profile, giving it the appearance of an alabaster statue. His eyes were pale, like those of the ghosts in Brevus’s childhood nightmares.

‘How did you get in?’

‘Oh, locks and I go back a long way,’ said the Doctor, effectively dismissing the subject as he began to inspect the mining relics dotted around the room, in much the same way as Tor Grymna had before him. ‘Don’t worry about it.

Is this genuine?’ he asked suddenly, picking up the oil lamp.

‘Yes,’ said Brevus cautiously as he joined him. It was impossible to ignore the Doctor’s abrupt excitement at his discovery. ‘It’s an antique. It was given to me by my uncle.’

The Doctor was looking at him again in that way of his, wide-eyed and penetrating. ‘It looks valuable. He must have been very proud of you.’

Brevus smiled. ‘I don’t know about that. He was also my tutor, and he could be very hard at times.’

‘Not very forthcoming with the praise, eh?’ The Doctor gently returned the lamp to its plinth. ‘I had a teacher like that once.’

‘He’s dead now, of course,’ said Brevus.

‘Of course.’

‘But he taught me a great deal. Not least of which was the fact that promotion can be a double-ended arrow.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘And you found that to be true?’

‘Oh, yes’ Brevus sighed and returned to his seat, dropping into it like a man with iron bones. He was very tired. More than anything he wanted to talk about his fears, to unburden his mind. The Doctor somehow encouraged this feeling without saying or doing anything.

He just stood and listened as Brevus talked. 'I took over as chief engineer at the ice mine only recently.

Anavolus himself appointed me. The promotion was the best thing that had ever happened to me, or my family. At least, that's what I thought then.'

'Until all this trouble started?'

Brevus sat forward and wiped his hands down over the fur of his face. 'It's not just the ice mine. It's everything. The Forum's losing its way – Tor Grymna is gaining more power all the time.'

'Such as?'

'He's recently taken responsibility for the city Custodians, for one thing.'

'They would be the guards with the staves and handbows, yes?'

69

Brevus nodded. 'Anavolus and Old Krumm defer to Tor Grymna's decisions more and more. But, as if that wasn't bad enough, the slimers are getting to be a real nuisance too. No one seems to know what to do about them.'

'Has anyone thought of asking the slimers?' Brevus regarded the Doctor quizzically. 'There are two sides to every story, Brevus,' the Doctor went on with an enigmatic smile.

Fitz stood up slowly from behind Tor Grymna's desk. Pins and needles filled his feet and legs and he had to wait a few seconds before he could move.

When he did, he crossed directly over to the interior door that led to Ckeho's room.

He stood close to it and listened for several seconds, hardly daring to breathe. He couldn't hear anything at first. But then, as his ears grew more used to the tiny little creaks and clicks of every empty household, and the distant murmur of the night-time city, he did pick out something: the sound of someone else breathing.

Fitz knocked. 'Hullo?'

There was silence for five long seconds.

Then a voice said, 'Who's that? Who's there?'

'Um, my name is Fitz. What's yours?' *Oh, good grief, his name's Ckeho you idiot.*

'Ckeho,' said the voice. 'What do you want? Has my father let you in here?'

Go away.'

'Well, in strict order of asking,' replied Fitz, 'A little chat, not exactly, and not yet.'

Ckeho's voice, when it next came, was right behind the door. Fitz jerked back as he spoke. 'I don't understand. What are you doing here? Are you a thief?'

'No,' said Fitz sharply. 'Listen, I'm a mate of the Doctor. You remember your dad said he was here? On Eskon?'

'Were you here before? When Father was here as well?'

'No. Well, yes, sort of,' Fitz grimaced. 'Look, can't you just open the door? I feel a bit daft talking like this.'

'I can't open the door,' said Ckeho. 'It's locked.'

'Why?'

Ckeho said, 'There's a key to open it in my father's desk. Get it, would you?'

'Right,' said Fitz, and then halted as he turned towards the desk. 'Hold on, why are you locked up?'

'I should have thought that was obvious.'

'Well –'

'Open the door and I'll explain. But be quick.'

70

Fitz was in a quandary. He felt he ought to let the poor bugger out, but at the same time he didn't feel like he knew half as much as he wanted to. He deliberated for several seconds, chewing his lip as he thought. Then Ckeho said, 'Please, hurry up! You saw what kind of

mood my father was in. If he comes back, he will beat me. Let me out. Please!’

This is ridiculous, thought Fitz. But even as he thought it he crossed to the desk and rummaged quickly through the shallow storage spaces beneath the open panels. He quickly found a long, slender glass rod that looked like it might fit the round hole in the interior door. What harm could it do?

He slotted the rod into the hole and it lit up with a cool yellow light. There was a click and the door unlocked.

‘OK, you can come out now,’ said Fitz, ‘but –’

The door burst open. Fitz caught a glimpse of a large, grey figure that leapt on him with an angry bark. Powerful hands clamped around his neck – and cold, wet fingers tightened around his throat.

71

Chapter Eleven

Slimier!

Fitz fell backwards and landed awkwardly, winded. The thing bore down on him like a great mass of snot, and then, with a savage laugh, bounded off him and away. Fitz rolled over just in time to see the figure dash out of the apartment.

For a few seconds he lay there, panting. He reached up to rub his neck, and found that it was coated with a film of something slippery. At first he thought it might be blood, but when he looked at his fingers he found they were covered in a thin, transparent slime.

‘Ckeho?’ he said. He got to his feet and looked into the empty interior room.

There was nothing to show that the kid was still there, or had ever been there

– unless you counted the thin strip of stained mattress on the floor and the collection of sheets and rags bundled in the corner of the room. There was a dreadful stale smell in there as well, a mixture of old sweaty socks and a bad infection.

Fitz staggered out of the room, and back into Tor Grymna’s

immaculate office. There was a trail of something sticky on the floor, leading to the apartment's exit. Fitz followed it out into the corridor, only now beginning to realise the truth.

Tor Grymna's son was a slimer.

'The slimers care for no one but themselves,' Brevus told the Doctor. They were sitting in his apartment, sipping luksh juice, which the Doctor found to be a sweet, treacly liquid served hot in shallow metal goblets. Brevus seemed tired, sagging in his chair and regarding his visitor with hooded eyes. His last comment had been made with weary impatience.

'Unlike the Eskoni,' replied the Doctor, 'who care for everyone and everything. *Except* the slimers. . . '

'I sense the anger behind your words, Doctor. You think the slimers are a downtrodden minority, misunderstood and misrepresented.'

'The thought had crossed my mind.'

Brevus nodded and sipped the last of his luksh. 'Very well. But you will learn the truth in the morning.'

73

'I thought it already was morning,' said the Doctor, turning towards the window where the first rays of light were beginning to shine. The room was filled with a pearly luminescence. 'Or is that a false dawn?'

'That is the light of Kankira, our largest moon. It has just risen. Its silver surface reflects the sun's light like no other.'

'It's beautiful' The Doctor got up and went over to the window for a better look. Just above the distant horizon was a large, perfectly white disc. It was bright enough to throw the desert world below into sharp relief, turning the red sands of Eskon into a sea of burnished metal. That was light enough to hunt by, or work by, realised the Doctor. Not so much a false dawn as a false day.

'It only lasts a few hours,' said Brevus, joining him. The moon circles the planet twice as quickly as any of the others.'

'That must have interesting gravitational side effects,' commented the Doctor. 'Do you suffer much in the way of seismic activity around here? Earthquakes and so on.'

Brevus, stifling a yawn, indicated that there were occasional tremors.

‘Kankira is the Eskon God of Sand,’ he added sleepily. ‘Those who worship him do so in the hope of avoiding earthquakes.’

‘I hope it works,’ murmured the Doctor. ‘Do you have many gods?’

‘Each god is represented by one of Eskon’s moons, yes. There are seven in all, although the first three are considered so minor that they have no interest in the planet they circle; instead they choose only to observe and either laugh or cry at the lives we lead. The most important moon represents Dallufvir, the All-father. It is into his devotion that Tor Grymna has entered.’

‘Tor Grymna’s a priest?’

Brevus shrugged. ‘He renounced his family for the priesthood, or so they say. But, while women without families are looked upon as the lowest kind of citizen, not even worthy of name or speech, family-less men can opt for the position of Tor. I believe Tor Grymna’s decision was motivated by political expediency. I doubt he cares about Dallufvir at all.’

‘Do you?’

Brevus smiled. ‘Not really.’

The Doctor seemed amused by this. ‘It’s interesting, the way most civilisations develop religious beliefs based on heavenly bodies. People all over the cosmos worship their moons, or their sun, or the stars above. Or the other-worldly things that live out there.’

Brevus frowned, feeling tired and unable to concentrate properly. ‘You doubt such things exist?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Oh, they exist all right. But sometimes I think people could do with looking more closely at the ground they walk on.’ The Doctor 74

paused, and then added, in a whisper, ‘And what lies beneath it.’

Brevus felt a shiver under his fur, despite the close warmth of the night air

‘Anyway,’ announced the Doctor suddenly, clapping a hand on the Eskoni’s arm, ‘let’s not worry about all that for now. We’ll have a

word with the slimers, first.’ The Doctor watched Brevus swallow another heartfelt yawn and hastily added, ‘Er – first thing in the morning, of course.’

The Doctor strolled back from Brevus’s apartment humming an aria from *La Traviata* and putting all thoughts of the slimers, Tor Grymna and the whole of the planet Eskon into his active subconscious for quiet consideration. Consciously he set about wondering what he was going to do with Compassion.

Or what she was going to do with *him*. There had been that business on Yquatine only recently, which underlined just how powerful a being she was.

Compassion had told him, afterwards, that the universe had better watch out for her. He didn’t know exactly what she had meant by that. Was it a threat or a warning? With Compassion it was never easy to tell. Probably the only thing that made her stick with him and Fitz was that she was more scared of the Time Lords and their plans to mate her with bull-TARDISEs than she was of striking out on her own.

And then the word Eskon popped back up out of his subconscious. Suitably prompted, he rallied his thoughts into cogitating upon the present situation.

Eskon. *Coldheart*. What lay at its centre, beneath the blazing hot surface? A core of solid, superdense ice? Or something worse? The Doctor had a nasty feeling about it all. The slimer mutations had to be caused by something –

they were unlikely to be a spontaneous genetic malady. He had his suspicions, formed by his subconscious as he busied himself worrying about Compassion and humming arias, but he really wanted to confirm his initial theories first.

The general hubbub of the Eskoni water market began to intrude upon his thoughts as he cut across the wide square. If anything, the place seemed busier than before, even though it was the middle of the night. This bore out another of the Doctor’s pet theories concerning Baktan: that most of its business actually took place at night, when it was relatively cooler, and particularly during those few hours of false light when the planet’s largest moon was at its zenith. The shining disc of Kankira threw its soft whitish glow through the large windows carved in the high ceiling of the market square. The whole area was lent a fascinatingly spectral ambience, and the Doctor slowed down just to

watch. Eventually, unable to resist the lure of any marketplace, he joined the throng of Eskoni as they traded tiny glasses of water, larger bottles of other liquids, and, on the outskirts, the usual market bric-a-brac and food.

One stall displayed lizard meat cooking in its own juices, and another sold strange spices and tobaccos. The resultant aroma was startlingly exotic and 75

soon the Doctor was immersed in the bustling community of traders.

He stopped at a vendor selling fruit and was invited to try several different specimens of dried grape and berry. As an alien, the Doctor quickly attracted the attention of those around him, and soon many of the Eskoni were talking to him and laughing as he tried to pay for his purchases without any local currency. His curiosity value was enough to win him a series of free samples, however, which he gratefully accepted. He offered chocolate and sweets in exchange, and gave an Eskoni child a glittering gold coin, which, when un-wrapped, proved to be made entirely of chocolate. It seemed to go down very well.

After about an hour of browsing through the stalls, the Doctor moved on, cheerily munching his way through a box of dates and humming a rather garbled version of a tune from *Madame Butterfly*. He found the way back to the guest quarters easily enough, and by the time he reached the door to his room he was just chewing his last fig. His hand paused on the locking bar.

Without touching it, he turned slowly on his heel and then started off along the passageway towards the room that had been given to Compassion. He carried on past her door until he reached the circular chamber in which the corridor culminated several metres further on. The chamber was a hollowed-out rock jutting from the surface of Baktan, with a picture window around two-thirds of its circumference, which gave on to a view of the desert beyond.

The peculiar silver light of Eskon's largest moon filled the chamber's polished floor with a chiaroscuro of shadows. Silhouetted against the central window was Compassion, statuesque in the lunar glow.

'How did you know I'd be here?' she asked, before he had even stepped into the light. She hadn't turned around.

'Lucky guess,' said the Doctor.

'More likely you're homing in on my telepathic circuits,' grunted

Compassion. ‘Please don’t. Whatever you had with your old TARDIS, you haven’t got with me.’

The Doctor winced visibly at the memory of his old time craft. What he wouldn’t do now to see that rickety old police box again!

‘Sorry,’ he said. He seemed to say that an awful lot nowadays. ‘Didn’t realise I was doing it. Won’t happen again.’

Her head bobbed slightly, either in acknowledgement of the apology or in muted derision. “S all right. It was bound to happen. I was modelled on your old ship, after all. There’s bound to be similarities. In fact, when you think about it, you and I are a lot like each other now.’

‘How so?’

‘We’re both on the run from the same people. We don’t need sleep. And there’s a hell of a lot more to us than meets the eye.’

76

‘Yes, but my hidden depths owe more to luck than design.’

‘Good luck, or bad luck?’

‘Ah, that depends on how I’m feeling at the time.’

Compassion gave a little snort. ‘Do you always feel that “time” should have a capital T?’

‘Only if it’s a proper noun. Otherwise she’d get all grumpy and probably trigger my next regeneration when I stub my toe.’

‘She?’

‘Long story. Time Lord mythology. Mostly rubbish.’

‘I thought about going, you know,’ said Compassion. She was looking up at the stars, which were now rendered practically invisible by the light of Kankira.

‘I know,’ the Doctor said. And he said it in such a way that Compassion turned and looked at him, realising that he didn’t want her to continue. How far could this Time Lord see into her TARDIS soul?

‘Doctor! Compassion!’ Fitz’s breathless voice interrupted them. He lurched into the chamber, his ragged panting echoing around the stone walls. ‘You’ll never guess,’ he told him.

The Doctor looked at him for a long moment, almost as if the answer were on the tip of his tongue. Refusing to have his thunder stolen, Fitz blurted, ‘Tor Grymna’s son’s a slimer!’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘The old fox has got a secret son,’ Fitz explained. ‘He keeps him locked away in his room, ‘cos he’s a *slimer*!’

The Doctor’s response was to slowly pass the fingers of one hand over his chin in contemplation. ‘Now that is interesting.’

‘Interesting?’ echoed Fitz with irritation. ‘He tried to kill me!’

‘Tor Grymna?’ asked Compassion.

‘No, the kid, Ckeho. I let him out and he damn well had a go at me. Look.’

Fitz pulled his head to one side so that the red marks on his throat were clearly visible. ‘Tried to throttle me, he did. And he was covered in bloody slime.’

‘Slow down,’ Compassion said. ‘Start at the beginning.’

The Doctor walked between them, one finger held above his head. ‘My room,’ he ordered.

‘Very interesting,’ the Doctor reiterated a little later, having sat and listened to Fitz’s story. ‘Did you follow him?’

‘Tor Grymna?’ queried Fitz.

‘No,’ said the Doctor patiently, ‘the boy. Ckeho.’

77

‘Are you kidding? By the time I got my breath back, he’d scarpered.’ Fitz adopted an injured tone. ‘He had the strength of ten, y’know. And I’ve got a knackered leg.’

‘All right, all right.’ The Doctor ran a hand through his wild tangle of hair.

‘He shouldn’t be too difficult to find, anyway.’

‘Hey, Baktan’s a big place, even if it is inside a rock,’ argued Fitz. He had uncovered his leg to inspect the knivor bite wound, for added emphasis.

‘Yes, but if you say Ckeho’s one of these slimer people. . . ’

Fitz continued to look puzzled and in pain at the same time.

‘Well, where would you go if *you* suddenly turned into a slimer?’ the Doctor said impatiently. ‘Trapped in a big city full of people who hate you?’

The penny dropped. ‘The shantytown.’

‘Exactly.’

Sighing, Fitz stood up, deliberately nursing his leg. With a limp, he started for the door. ‘I suppose you’ll want me to catch up with him straightaway,’ he said, with just the right degree of suffering in his voice.

‘No, no, no.’ The Doctor bounded out of his chair and held Fitz back. Fitz’s spirits lifted immediately, only to plunge back down a second later as the Doctor added, ‘That had better wait until morning. That’s when we’re going, isn’t it, Compassion?’

‘Apparently,’ said Compassion.

‘Great,’ said Fitz without enthusiasm. ‘We can all go together. A nice day out in Mutantville.’

‘This Ckeho business puts a different spin on things,’ said the Doctor.

‘How come?’ asked Compassion.

‘Well, first of all it explains Tor Grymna’s attitude towards us. He has rejected his own family – or they’ve rejected him – but, to save face politically, he joined the priesthood. So if he has got a son – and, worse still, if that son is a slimer – then he definitely *has* got something to hide, and, as a ruthless man, he’ll probably go to great lengths to keep it hidden. And we must therefore pose some kind of threat to him personally. And secondly, if his secret is now on the loose, it’ll make him positively dangerous.’

‘He’s head of security around here, isn’t he?’ said Compassion.

‘He controls the city militia, the Custodians, yes.’

‘Couldn’t he just have us expelled or whatever he wants to call it? I think his exact words were “sucked dry and left out in the desert to burn”.’

‘I think he’d like that a lot,’ agreed the Doctor, ‘but we’re in Anavolus’s good books, remember, and something like that would have to be a Forum decision.’

‘But how long can we count on Anavolus?’ wondered Fitz. ‘He and Tor Grymna go back a long way, by the looks of things. He owes more to his Forum chums than to us, surely?’

78

The Doctor nodded. ‘You’re probably right. Which means we can’t afford to hang around. We’ll see the slimers first thing, and take it from there.’

‘You think this problem can be sorted out like that?’ Compassion sounded dubious.

Not at all. The slimers are just a symptom of the underlying malaise, I’m sure of it.’ The Doctor had begun to pace around his room, alternately stroking his chin and pulling at his hair as he thought. Anavolus thinks that the mutations have been caused by radiation from the solar flares. What do you make of that?’

‘It’s nonsense,’ said Compassion instantly and emphatically. ‘There aren’t any abnormal radiation levels in the vicinity that could be responsible for that kind of cellular modification. The background reading’s a bit high for human-normal, but these people aren’t human and the planet *is* being fried by its sun.’

A thought struck the Doctor. ‘Is it safe for Fitz here? I can withstand a fair amount of radiation, and you’re indestructible. But he *is* human-normal. Ish.’

‘Hey, I *am* here, you know.’

Compassion said, ‘I’ve been monitoring your melanocyte levels since we came out of the ice mine. So long as we don’t stay here too long, and you stay out of the sun’s direct ultraviolet light, you’ll probably just get a good tan.’

‘Best news I’ve heard all day,’ said Fitz.

‘So what is causing the mutations?’ wondered the Doctor. ‘Climatic change?’

‘The solar flare burnt off most of the planet’s surface moisture, but it was already an arid desert world to begin with. The ecological change couldn’t have been that traumatic. The Eskoni have practically solved the water shortage by mining the subterranean ice.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor thoughtfully. ‘They have, haven’t they?’

Tor Grymna was in a black mood as he paced the empty Forum chamber. He was too angry for sleep – too full of misgivings to even relax for a minute. Old Krumm had finally sloped off to his own bed and his little band of slave girls, and Anavolus had retired for the night to his family quarters.

A spasm of pain made Tor Grymna rub his breastbone with the thumb of one meaty hand. His heart always jolted when he thought of his family, of what he had lost thanks to Ckeho. The pain was overridden by the hate that welled up in his chest as he considered his son, and the continual arguments and rows that had dominated their time together since the mutation.

Ckeho had been a happy, healthy Eskoni boy until the slimer genes hidden away in his body had turned him into the mad, shambling *thing* that Tor Grymna was now forced to keep locked away in his apartment. Ckeho’s 79

mother had been unable to accept the transformation, and, urged on by her own powerful family, had left Tor Grymna in the bitterest of circumstances.

That night, an unusually moonless and wretchedly black night in Baktan, Tor Grymna had come close to killing Ckeho. He had stood over the boy –

no, not a boy any longer, but a *thing* – and screamed at him to die. He was prepared to do the job himself, if necessary. The knife had shaken in his fist, a tiny space from the glistening throat of the *thing* that bore no resemblance to the slender, softly skinned neck of his boy. Tor Grymna had willed himself to do it, to complete the task. But a tiny fragment of his sanity had reined in his passion and reminded him that he was doing this out of anger, out of helpless frustration, and not because he wanted to take a life.

Tor Grymna had hurled the knife across the kitchen and listened to it ricochet from a surface. Then, without another glance at the putrescent thing at his feet, he had walked away and left him.

Later, when he had returned, Ckeho – or what had once been Ckeho – had dragged himself into the adjacent room. Tor Grymna had emotionlessly locked the door. The kitchen work surface had a gouge in the wood the width of Tor Grymna's hand where the knife had struck it. Tor Grymna had retrieved the knife and, with barely a grunt, driven the blade as far as he could into the worktop.

It was still there, standing rigid, waiting for the time when Tor Grymna would have the courage to use it.

But, for now, he had work to do. Because, if one thing was certain, Tor Grymna was not going to let anything – or anyone – prevent him from carrying out his sacred duty to the Forum and Baktan itself. The slimers would not stop him, and nor would Ckeho.

And nor, for that matter, would the Doctor.

80

Chapter Twelve

Close Quarters

Dawn struck like an ironmonger's hammer. The temperature accelerated in a matter of minutes as Eskon's fiery sun breasted the edge of the world and poured heat over the cracked and sandy land.

Fitz was awoken by the heat rather than the light. He rolled over in the bed, dragging away the single thin sheet that had become tangled around his perspiring body. Then, after a few experimental coughs with a phenomenally dry mouth, he had suddenly realised where he was.

'Hell!' He jerked out of the bed and thumped on to the hard floor, pulling the sheet with him. He tried to stand up but his foot caught in the sweat-damp material and he tripped over. 'Hell!'

Clawing his way free of the sheet, he scrambled naked across the floor and scalded his bare foot on a section of the tiled floor where the rising sun had been shining. 'Hell!'

Finally, recumbent on the floor and peering up through eyelids half

gummed together with sleep and drowsiness, he looked up and saw someone smiling down at him. It was the slave girl. Florence. She bent over and offered him a glass full of something that looked suspiciously like fruit juice.

‘Hello,’ he said.

‘Glad you could join us,’ remarked the Doctor dryly as Fitz skidded to a halt.

‘Who’s your friend?’

‘Doctor, Compassion, this is Florence,’ panted Fitz. Florence was holding his hand and smiling shyly at them. ‘Sorry I’m late,’ Fitz added. ‘Morning, Brevus.’

The Eskoni was standing slightly to one side of the Doctor and Compassion, with two muscular Custodians behind him. ‘The girl is coming with you?’

Brevus said with a frown, and in a tone of voice that put the slave girl firmly in the poodle bracket.

‘Of course she isn’t,’ replied Fitz abruptly.

‘Come on,’ said the Doctor impatiently. ‘I want to make an early start today.’

They were standing by the wide exit doors of the city, which were slots that looked to Fitz to be about thirty by a hundred feet in the lowermost wall.

81

This in itself was some three or four metres thick by Fitz’s reckoning, and butted straight on to a sloping apron of granite that led down to the gates proper. From the cool gloom of the ground floor, the entrances were blazing rectangles of orange light. The Doctor had already started walking towards the gates, silhouetted against the glare. With his Victorian gambler’s costume and a relaxed, slightly rangy walk that was almost but not quite a swagger, Fitz thought he looked like a Western gunslinger headin’ into town. ‘Clint Eastwood, eh?’ he murmured.

‘What?’ asked Brevus with obvious irritation.

‘Nothing.’ Fitz smiled, and then, just to annoy the Eskoni further, turned and said goodbye to Florence. ‘I’ll be back as soon as I can, he told her truthfully.

The shantytown was obscured from sight by the brilliance of the daylight, and so they smelled it before they saw it: a heavy stink of open sewer and disease.

Once again Fitz felt the breath burned out of his lungs and his skin tingling as they stepped into its dazzling embrace. He realised that the germs here must breed by the zillions in this heat. Or could it be so hot that they were all killed stone dead? He hoped so.

The Doctor had reached the gates already and was kneeling on the sandy ground, examining a series of jagged cracks that stretched away into the distance along the side of the city foundations. As they caught up with him, the Time Lord was feeling along one of the larger cracks with the tips of his fingers. It was just wide enough for him to insert the first third of his index finger.

‘What’s caused these cracks?’ he wondered aloud, but no one knew whom exactly he was addressing. Himself, probably, thought Fitz. ‘I noticed them when we arrived.’

‘Maybe the heat has cracked the earth around here,’ suggested Fitz. ‘Like a dried river bed.’

But the Doctor shook his head. ‘No no no. This is rock, solid rock, not dried mud.’ He stood up and dusted his hands, just as something small and heavy whistled through the space where he had knelt. A stone cracked off the gate pillar, sending little chips into the air.

They looked up to see a small crowd of slimers gathered nearby. Some of them had stones in their gloved hands; even as they watched, some made to hurl the rocks. Instinctively the little party turned away, trying to shield themselves from the onslaught. A rain of stones clattered around them, one bouncing painfully off Fitz’s left shoulder. Another clanged against the armoured breastplate of one of Brevus’s Custodians. He immediately started towards the slimers with an angry snarl, pulling a loaded handbow out from under his cloak.

82

‘No, Zela,’ snapped Brevus quickly. ‘Wait.’

Another stone caused Brevus to duck, and a second spun off Zela’s

helmet.

The slimers were redoubling their efforts, scooping larger stones and chips of rock from the ground and pitching them with ferocious strength. At the head of the gang of mutants stood a thickset creature with burning white eyes scowling from within a heavy hood. Fitz recognised him instantly as the slimer who had taken a handbow bolt in the shoulder on their arrival the previous evening. There was no mistaking that dreadful glare.

‘Wait,’ cried the Doctor, walking towards the slimers with his hands held up placatingly. ‘Wait, we only want to talk!’

Suddenly he staggered backward, clutching his head, twisting and falling on to the dusty ground. Brevus and his guards surged forward while Compassion and Fitz helped the Doctor to his feet. Blood was oozing from a nasty gash on his forehead.

Zela and his companion fired a pair of handbow bolts into the slimer group.

It was impossible to tell if any struck home, but the group dispersed slightly.

Zela drew a baton and started forward with it raised over his head, but halted when someone shouted, ‘Stop!’ from behind him.

The Doctor walked unsteadily forward, one hand trying to staunch the bleeding from his forehead, and the other held up for peace. ‘Don’t fight.

Don’t fight,’ he urged, as Fitz and Compassion caught up.

‘Brevus,’ he said, his voice suddenly full of authority, ‘get rid of the Custodians. Dismiss them!’

‘But, Doctor –’

‘Dismiss them!’

Brevus signalled curtly at Zela and his friend, who, still with batons raised, looked perplexed. Slowly they stepped backwards, frowning and muttering.

Zela in particular looked truculent.

The Doctor had pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and was

dabbing at the wound to his head, examining the bright red spots it left on the linen.

Quietly, he whispered to Fitz, 'In a moment everyone's going to be watching me. As soon as you get the chance, go and find Tor Grymna's son.'

Fitz nodded once, unhappy with the prospect but unwilling to cause a scene: the atmosphere around here was way too tense. Besides which, the Doctor gave him no opportunity to argue. Already he had turned back to face the slimers gathered nearby.

'There was no need for this,' he said, and his voice carried powerfully across the space between him and the group of slimers, who had paused in their stone-throwing to watch the strange spectacle. It was clear none of them had expected the Custodians to be called off.

'All I want to do is talk,' the Doctor continued. 'What harm is there in that?'

83

'We don't have anything to say to you,' said the nearest of the slimers.

'All right. Let me do the talking, and you can just listen,' said the Doctor. He put away his handkerchief and held out his hand. 'I'm the Doctor.'

It was true, realised Fitz: every pair of eyes was on the Doctor and the slimer. The air was electric with the possibility of further violence. Rather more discreetly than he thought possible, Fitz slipped quietly into the black shadow of a nearby hut.

'Pleased to meet you, Revan,' said the Doctor. The slimer had refused to offer his own hand, but that wasn't too much of a surprise. 'I'm sorry about this little misunderstanding, but –'

'You're no Eskoni,' said Revan.

'No, I'm a visitor to your world.'

'Living in the city? Guests of the Forum?' Revan spat the last word angrily.

'At the moment, yes.'

The slimer gave a slight lurch of his thick shoulders in what was

probably a sign of derision. It was difficult to tell under all those rags and moth-eaten cloaks. ‘What do you want?’

‘I’d like to help,’ replied the Doctor, ‘if I can.’

At this Revan let out a glottal laugh that contained no trace of humour. His pallid eyes stared out from the darkness beneath his frayed hood, boring into the Doctor’s own as the Time Lord coolly met the slimer’s gaze. ‘We’re beyond help,’ he rasped simply.

‘There must be something that can be done,’ insisted the Doctor. He was now standing quite near the slimer, easily within striking distance. Compassion watched with interest as Brevus tensed up ready to run or fight, quickly glancing back towards the city gates where Zela and his friend were lurking with distrustful expressions. ‘Even if your condition isn’t treatable, there’s no need to live like this. . .’

‘Condition?’ snarled Revan.

‘I’d like to try to find the cause of the mutation,’ continued the Doctor. ‘With your co-operation –’

‘Do you know *anything* about us?’ Revan demanded. ‘No one’s interested in us. No one cares. No one really understands!’

‘Then let me –’

With a hiss of fury Revan grabbed the Doctor and swung him to the ground with terrific strength. The Doctor caught a fistful of the creature’s rags and pulled him down with him, overbalancing the slimer. They hit the ground and rolled in the dust, Revan’s powerful fingers finding the Doctor’s throat in seconds.

* * *

Oblivious to the sudden breakdown in peaceful negotiations, Fitz hurried through the narrow lanes that crisscrossed the shantytown. It was a nightmare journey. The heat and stench were choking: he was forced to run with one hand over his nose and mouth to try to cut out the worst of it. Clouds of flies flew in haphazard formation over puddles of bodily waste and rotting food – things that might have been rats but looked like lizards darted away from him as he approached and disappeared into every nook and cranny: under buckboards, between tents, into mattresses. Some scuttled away and

hid beneath piles of rags that Fitz only realised later were the huddled forms of slimers sitting in their hovels and watching him run by.

Where was Ckeho? Why would *anyone* want to come here?

He rounded a corner, skidding to a halt in a cloud of dust. Up ahead were a group of slimers blocking the narrow entry to the next section of haphazardly arranged tents and hovels. They stopped and stared at Fitz with unseeing white eyes. He hesitated, wondering if they were going to attack. He must have been *insane* to come in here. . .

They didn't move, so he quickly turned and jogged the other way, trusting to luck and bluff. It had kept him alive so far all over the universe, after all.

Around the next bend he had a real stroke of luck. At the end of the narrow lane he saw another slimer, but this one wasn't wrapped up in the usual filthy grey rags and bandages. It wore a long sand-coloured cloak, torn and frayed at the hem, but definitely new. It looked back at Fitz with frightened white eyes.

'Ckeho!' cried Fitz, darting forward.

But the figure disappeared into the next alley, its cloak trailing in the sand.

A cloud of burning red dust had enveloped the Doctor and Revan as they brawled in the sand. Gritting his teeth, Brevus moved to separate them, only to be intercepted by another slimer who cannoned into him with stunning force.

By this point, Zela and his colleague had come running to join the fray.

Zela loosed off a handbow shot, the bolt thudding into the chest of one of the slimers and propelling him back into a nearby tent, which promptly collapsed.

Several more of the mutants pushed forward to take their fallen comrade's place, and another bolt found its home in a slimer's head. Moments later the Eskoni Custodians were flailing about them with drawn batons. The grunt and smack of close-quarter combat filled the boiling air.

All the Doctor could hear were Revan's bestial growls as the slimer tried to squeeze his larynx flat. The Doctor jerked his arms between

the creature's thick wrists and managed to fractionally loosen the deadly grip – just enough for him to land a heavy punch to the slimer's solar plexus. Or at least where 85

he judged it to be; he was dismayed to find his hand sinking into spongy flesh wrapped in a thick layer of cloth with no appreciable effect. With a roar, the slimer batted the Doctor aside with a bone-cracking swipe of his gloved paw.

At this point, deciding that enough was enough, Compassion stepped forward, dragged Revan to his feet and sent him stumbling back towards his fellows. Then she pulled the Doctor upright and planted herself firmly between the two of them. 'That's *it*,' she said. 'Leave off.'

'Compassion,' choked the Doctor, rubbing his neck, 'I had him *exactly* where I wanted –'

'Oh, be quiet. This is ridiculous. You can't reason with animals like this.

Let's go.'

'Compassion –'

'I agree with her,' said Brevus. The situation's out of hand here. It's too dangerous.'

Revan stepped forward again, fists balled. 'That's right, run away. Run back to the city, and your friends on the Forum. Tell that old fossil Anavolus that the slimers have had enough. Tell him and Tor Grymna that we're going to bring them down, and soon.'

The Doctor opened his mouth to reply, but Compassion gripped him by one arm and yanked him after her, heading for the city gates. Brevus and Zela walked backwards, handbows held ready to shoot in case any of the mutants attempted to relaunch the attack.

'Looks like we've got a slimer revolt on our hands now,' said Brevus ruefully as they cleared the gates.

'Rubbish,' said the Doctor. 'He's bluffing. I've met people like him before.

All talk.' He was still massaging his throat. 'A few more seconds and I'd've had him –'

‘Doctor, look,’ interrupted Compassion, pointing at the ground by the gates.

The same cracks that the Doctor had drawn their attention to on the way out were still visible. The Doctor stopped muttering and dropped to his knees again, inspecting the crevices minutely. After a moment he fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his magnifying glass. ‘Now that’s not right,’ he said, peering closely through the lens.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Brevus.

‘These cracks have grown wider since we saw them before.’ said the Doctor bluntly. ‘Look.’ He was now able to push his finger further into the gap.

‘Only about two point five nine millimetres,’ Compassion advised.

‘But that’s quite a lot in just a few minutes,’ the Doctor added, jumping to his feet. ‘Certainly more than it should be.’

86

‘Some sort of seismic disturbance?’ suggested Compassion. ‘That would fit with my preliminary tectonic scans.’

‘Perhaps,’ said the Doctor. ‘But have you felt any tremors?’

Compassion shrugged. ‘I feel minute ground disturbances all the time, but there’s been nothing out of the ordinary.’

‘Hm.’

Brevus said, ‘It could be the result of the ice mine probing deeper underground for frozen reservoirs.’

‘Possibly,’ murmured the Doctor, tapping his chin with his fingers. ‘Possibly. . .’

‘Or?’ prompted Compassion.

‘Or it’s something else.’ The Doctor’s eyes flashed ice-blue in the burning heat of the desert. ‘Something terrible.’

87

Chapter Thirteen

‘Gotcha!’ Fitz gasped, catching the running figure around one leg in a poor attempt at a rugby tackle. They both fell into the dirt in a whirl of arms and legs, dust flying. Not relishing the prospect of another run in this heat, Fitz wasted no time in securing his catch. He managed to swing one long leg over the prostrate body beneath him and pinned it down with his own weight.

Then he grabbed a wrist and yanked the arm up behind his captive’s back in the classic police manoeuvre with which Fitz was passingly familiar.

‘OK, son, you’re nicked,’ he said, and pulled the slimer upright. ‘I suggest you come quietly.’

Without much attempt at protest, the mutant allowed his captor to push him into the shadow of a low canopy strung between two hovels. It was filled with bits of broken machinery and wood, and some small lizards that scurried away into the gloomy recesses as they entered. Fitz was satisfied that they couldn’t easily be seen in the relatively dim light – outside it was blinding, and from there this little hole would look completely black. Nevertheless, he used a piece of thin wood or card he found in the rubbish to rest up against the entrance as a makeshift door. Now they were nice and private, and away from the prying eyes of any other slimers who might pass by.

The only real problem was that it was as hot as an oven and smelled like a toilet.

‘What do you want?’ growled the slimer.

‘Well, a simple thank-you would be a start,’ Fitz told him. ‘Remember me?’

I’m the bloke who set you free. Or rather, I’m the mug who unlocked your door and then got trampled on in your rush to leave.’

‘If they follow you here, they’ll kill us both.’

Fitz paled. ‘Listen, why don’t we just start again? It’s Ckeho, isn’t it? I’m Fitz.’

Why did you come after me?’ asked Ckeho. His eyes looked round and grey, almost pearlescent in the darkness. Fitz couldn’t see his face properly. ‘What do you want?’

The sweat was running down Fitz's face in actual droplets. Sitting back on his haunches and trying to regain his breath, he considered a suitable response 89

to Ckeho's question. 'I don't suppose you've got any fags on you?'

Tor Grymna flung open the door of his office and took in the scene at a glance: the wide-open interior door, the empty room beyond.

With an incoherent cry he slammed shut the door. He had worked through the night in the ancillary offices adjoined to the Forum chamber, drafting letters to the nearest trading cities, checking maps and caravan routes to try to calculate which way was the best for sending the messengers. He was tired, overtired, but he could not rest until he had done all he could to prevent a complete ostracisation of Baktan from the rest of Eskon. Without the supplies usually guaranteed from other towns and cities, Baktan would die a slow and painful death. He would do anything, work any hours, to avoid that.

He had expected to return to his apartments in the early hours, perhaps earlier than this, and collapse gratefully into his bed. He had not expected this.

The interior door had not been forced; he noticed that right away. In fact the key was still in the lock. Someone had let Ckeho free.

Tor Grymna stalked into the dining area of his apartment, trembling with rage. Visions of his estranged family, Ckeho's mother, and the boy himself –

before the mutation – flashed through his mind in a jumble of images. He remembered standing over Ckeho with his arm raised to strike him down for ever.

The knife still stood on the tabletop, glinting in the hard morning light.

'I came here because this is where I thought I belonged,' said Ckeho. His voice rasped painfully in a throat clogged with mucus. Fitz couldn't see him clearly, but his skin seemed to be permanently wet, glistening in whatever light there was.

'All slimers come here, right?' prompted Fitz.

'All slimers are *sent* here,' Ckeho corrected him. 'Except me.'

‘Because of your dad? Tor Grymna didn’t want you to have to live out here, right? I can understand that.’

Ckeho shook his head sadly. ‘My father just wanted to protect his own reputation. He had forced all the slimers into leaving Baktan. He couldn’t face the humiliation of having his own son being one.’

‘But he didn’t want you to go, right? Maybe he does care really.’ Fitz struggled to find a way of explaining how he felt. Something about Ckeho’s plight had touched a nerve with him.

‘How could he? He might have cared once – but not since this happened.’

Ckeho leaned forward so that his face finally came into a shaft of warm light that had cut through a gap between Fitz’s cardboard door and the ceiling.

90

His skin was a mottled grey colour, tough and cracked but coated in a thick layer of slime. His eyes were nothing more than small white spheres set deep into the pallid flesh above a circular mouth. Inside the mouth were a ring of tiny, sharp teeth protruding from inflamed black gums. Mucus oozed over the teeth and lips and hung in sticky strings from the jaw.

‘When an Eskoni mutates like this, the Forum is immediately notified. Steps are taken to remove the mutant cleanly and efficiently. Sometimes the slimer will fight back, sometimes they are even killed in the process. But none of them stay in the city.’

‘But –’

‘No family wishes to be tainted by the presence of a slimer,’ croaked Ckeho.

‘Families are torn apart when one of their number mutates. It is the ultimate humiliation. My own father allowed himself to be exiled from his own family to stop them finding out about me. He told my friends and people who knew me that I had died. That is why he wears the black robes and is given the respectful title of “Tor”. He is looked upon with a mixture of pity and awe.’

‘Still better off than a slimer, though, isn’t he?’

‘My father couldn’t let it be known that his own son was a mutant, but rather than kill me he kept me a secret.’

‘You wish he *had* killed you?’

Ckeho’s white eyes blinked slowly. ‘Wouldn’t you?’

Fitz stuttered for a moment. ‘But the slimers can live out here, together. It’s more of a refugee camp, I know, but *together*. . . couldn’t you do something to make life easier for yourselves?’

Ckeho sucked in a long, bitter gasp of breath. ‘You talk as though I were one of these people. I’m not. Tor Grymna represents everything these people hate and distrust about Baktan,’ said Ckeho simply. ‘It is his policies that keep them here, festering in poverty and hatred. The resentment they feel towards his son is understandable.’

‘So they didn’t exactly welcome you with open arms, right?’

‘I thought I might be accepted here. As soon as I explained who I was, they turned on me. Told me to return to the city and my father. Or go out into the desert and die.’

‘That’s not fair,’ argued Fitz. ‘It isn’t your fault he’s your dad. And you couldn’t help being a slimer any more than anyone else here.’

‘Revan doesn’t see it that way.’

‘Revan?’

‘He speaks for the slimers.’

Fitz nodded. ‘I think I saw him before – lips like inner tubes and eyes like pickled onions, right?’

91

‘Your words don’t make any sense to me. None of them have. You still have not told me why you followed me here.’ A strange puckering in the centre of Ckeho’s glistening features gave him a suitably puzzled look. ‘No Eskoni would willingly enter this place.’

Fitz said, with as much dignity as he could muster, ‘I’m an Earthman. We do things differently. Or, rather, some of us do. My friends and I want to help you, that’s all.’

Ckeho shook his head, sadly echoing the words of Revan: ‘No one can

help us now.'

'Look, no one deserves what's happened to you, or your mates,' said Fitz.

'But the Doctor can help you, I'm sure of it. He'll sort something out. He may not be able to change what's happened to you lot, but he'll find a way to stop it happening to anyone else. That's got to be worth something.'

'The Doctor?'

'Yeah, you wouldn't believe him. Don't let the hair and the clothes put you off – he's cool.'

Ckeho considered this for several seconds. 'You say he is a doctor?'

'He's *the* Doctor. And believe me, he's the best.'

The sandcar crawled to the top of the dune and hesitated slightly before beginning the slow descent towards the ice mine, almost as if it knew the chain of consequences that its journey was setting in motion. Oblivious to these consequences, the sandcar's passengers sat beneath its tarpaulin shades and gazed out through narrowed eyes at the burning desert that stretched from horizon to horizon around them.

'The Sea of Dryness,' Brevus told the Doctor and Compassion as they studied the arid landscape. 'In the distance you can just see the Drechnar Mountains.'

The mountains were no more than a shimmering line of pink between the red of the sand and the searing orange of the sky. Directly ahead was the gleaming spire of the ice mine, and it was towards this that the Doctor's attention was drawn.

'Thanks for getting us out here so quickly, Brevus,' he said.

'Strictly speaking I should first have requested authority from the Forum before allowing you to visit the ice mine again,' replied Brevus. 'But I think that the less Tor Grymna has to know about your whereabouts, the better.'

'My sentiments exactly.'

'And it also means we can leave your guards behind,' added Compassion.

‘They report directly to Tor Grymna, don’t they?’

‘That is true,’ confirmed Brevus. ‘Sometimes I am not sure whether Zela is my personal Custodian or a spy.’

92

‘Probably both,’ said the Doctor. ‘But won’t you get into trouble with the Forum if they find you’ve taken us out on an unauthorised excursion?’

Brevus actually smiled at this. ‘Doctor, I am directly related to Anavolus’s family. That means I enjoy a certain amount of freedom in these matters.’

‘Nepotism,’ grunted the Doctor.

‘Useful,’ said Compassion.

The ice mine offered considerably more comfort in the way of ambient temperature when they got inside. Brevus and the Doctor were both relieved to be able to get out of the baking sunlight, although it didn’t bother Compassion at all. Theoretically she could bask in the flames of an exploding star and not feel it.

Once inside the main control room of the mine, however, the Doctor automatically pulled his coat back on and followed Brevus to a large bank of controls. There were a number of computer-type data consoles, which the Doctor quickly got the hang of, his fingers confidently darting over the key-pads. A number of disc-shaped screens filled with digitised information, and the Doctor smiled. ‘You Eskoni really hide your technological achievements under a bushel, don’t you?’

‘Bushel?’

Nes, it’s a unit of measurement. Capacity. About eight gallons, in fact.’ The Doctor frowned as he followed this train of thought.

‘Actually, when you think about it, it doesn’t make that much sense, does it?’

‘If you mean we keep our technology in its place, then yes,’ replied Brevus.

‘You’ve also adopted a remarkably simple language code,’ said

Compassion, joining them at the console. 'Not very secure.'

'It doesn't have to be,' said the Doctor. 'Not everyone goes around looking over their shoulder all the time, Compassion. Ah, here we are. Full spectro-graphic analysis of the mine system, including a potted history of its construction, I see.' He chewed his lip as he quickly scanned through the information.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright and stared at Brevus as though he had never seen him before. 'Did you say applied thermionics?'

'I never said a word, Doctor.'

'Last night I mean, just before we were interrupted by Tor Grymna.'

'As I remember it,' said Compassion, 'it was you who used the term "applied thermionics", Doctor. Brevus merely said that the Eskoni used controlled explosives to help melt the ice when necessary.'

'Well?' prompted the Doctor, continuing to study Brevus closely.

Brevus cleared his throat, unsure why he was feeling so pressurised. 'Well, 93

we do use thermium explosives to speed-melt the ice reservoirs prior to vaporisation.'

'Speed-melt?' queried Compassion.

'The thermium reacts with the frozen water at an exponential rate, I should think,' postulated the Doctor excitedly, without waiting for Brevus to reply.

'Not explosive enough to shatter or even crack the ice, but a modulated generation of heat that thaws it practically instantaneously.'

Compassion scoffed.

'You're bigger on the inside than the outside and can travel through time and space,' said the Doctor. 'Turning ice into water just like that –' he clicked his fingers loudly – 'must be relatively simple.'

'If you say so.'

'I do.' The Doctor stood up. 'And it would be almost essential in a mining operation like this. Is this thermium stuff kept here, Brevus?'

I'd love to have a look at it.'

Brevus opened his mouth to reply, but the Doctor was already speaking again: 'Right now, though, we need to examine the mining records to see if there's anything to link it to the slimer mutations.'

Compassion was flicking through the datascreens, her solid features reflecting the soft green light of the displays like marble. 'I've called up a tectonic analysis here. Full breakdown of seismic activity in the area since. . . since whenever this date was – I don't understand the Eskoni calendar. But it's interesting: there's a definite geological fault line running through the entire region. It's not formed by two separate tectonic plates, though: it's more like some kind of subductive crack, maybe a hairline stress fracture.'

The Doctor joined her at the console, examining the graphics intently. 'The displacement is minimal, though. Probably more of a long-term cumulative effect – imperceptible movement rather than one sudden upheaval. But look at this.' The Doctor's long finger picked out a particular trace on the computer map. 'I'm no expert in subterranean topography, but that's a little odd, wouldn't you say?'

Compassion frowned. 'Some kind of solid fissure?'

The Doctor tapped some keys and the graphics changed. 'There's something not right about all this. What do you make of it, Brevus?'

The Eskoni was peering at the display with a puzzled crease between his eyes. 'It's too high to be an ice seam,' he said. 'Could be a permafrost concentration.'

'Might be worth a look,' suggested Compassion.

'I don't see how we can,' argued the Doctor. It doesn't run through any of the mapped cave system or mine workings according to the information we have here. There's nothing around it but solid rock.'

94

'Might it have been caused by the excavation or actual steam drilling?

'asked Brevus. 'We have been probing much deeper into the lower ice fields recently. Perhaps it has resulted in some kind of subsidence.'

'Wait wait wait,' said the Doctor suddenly. 'You say you've been probing deeper? How much deeper?'

‘Well –’ Brevus called up the relevant data on the circular VDUs. ‘We’ve exhausted one of the main reservoirs. In order to ensure a long-term water supply we decided to try to access some of the deeper reservoirs here. . . and here. They are far larger, but a lot more difficult to reach.’

‘How long ago would you say this was? When you first started to extract this deep ice water, I mean?’ When Brevus told him, the Doctor banged the flat of his hand down loudly on the data panel. ‘Almost exactly when the first slimer mutations began,’ he said, speaking quickly but precisely. ‘It’s something in the water supply, Brevus. When the mining went below a certain level, it hit something in the ice which has been transferred into your water system and caused the genetic malfunction.’

‘But surely the water purification systems –’ Compassion started, but the Doctor waved her protestation aside.

‘No water-purification system is absolutely perfect. And besides, the coincidence is too great to ignore – it has to be investigated.’

‘This is terrible, if it’s true,’ said Brevus.

‘We have to go down there and look for ourselves,’ the Doctor told him.

Brevus shook his head. ‘We can’t go down without help. We need men and supplies – not to mention permission from the Forum. But I can’t see how you can hope to get that without some kind of proof of what you say, Doctor.’

‘Right.’ The Doctor turned on his heel and headed for the exit. ‘Let’s go back to the city. We need to see Anavolus. We can get proof on the way.’

‘How?’

The Doctor’s voice floated back from the exit tunnel. ‘By testing the water, of course.’

The cardboard was torn away with lightning speed and hot sunlight filled the hole. Fitz twisted away from the rag-gloved hands that reached in for him, but there was nowhere to go. Thick fingers grabbed him by the arm and neck and dragged him out.

He was hurled to the floor, the breath knocked right out of him and

hot sand filling his mouth. He screwed up his eyes against the sudden brilliance of the day. Dark figures in stained cloaks were gathering over him. He recognised the thick, guttural voice of the slimer called Revan.

‘Fancy living here, do you?’

95

Fitz lashed out with a foot at the nearest slimer to give himself some space.

Then he carefully got to his knees, squinting up at the hunched figure. ‘About as much as I fancy you, mate,’ he said.

A slimer hit the ground next to him, clawing at the dirt and coughing. It was Ckeho. Steeling himself, Fitz bent down and helped the kid to his feet.

Together they stood, leaning on each other, and faced the circle of mutants gathered around them. Pairs of unfriendly white eyes stared out from the depths of oily hoods.

‘We’ve been looking for you,’ Revan said to Ckeho. ‘Didn’t think you’d be holed up with one of their kind.’ He waved a paw at Fitz. ‘Thought you said you were one of us now.’

‘I am,’ sobbed Ckeho. He held up his glistening grey hands, the fingers no more than featureless stumps. ‘Look at me!’

‘You’re Grymna’s kid,’ snarled Revan, and then he lunged forward, catching Ckeho across the face with his hand. There was a wet smack and Ckeho spun around before falling to the ground again. He lay there, choking on his own mucus, as Revan delivered a vicious kick to his ribs.

‘Stop it!’ Fitz surged forward, but strong arms held him back, and within seconds he too was the focus of several punches and kicks that returned him to the sand, where he lay curled up in fear. ‘All right, all right,’ he gasped.

‘Leave us alone!’

Revan squatted down next to him, and Fitz could smell the filthy material of his gloves as a moist hand gripped him by the hair and lifted his head out of the sand. ‘Oh, we haven’t finished with you yet,

friend.' Thick grey lips peeled back from the spiny teeth that filled his mouth, thick with slime. 'Not by a long way.'

96

Chapter Fourteen

The Squirring

'A simple glass of water,' said the Doctor, holding up a small test tube of colour-less liquid between the finger and thumb of one hand. Eskon's sun glittered like copper through the tiny vessel. The Doctor flicked his fingers and the tube disappeared.

Brevus blinked. 'Where did it go?'

'Not far.' The Doctor smiled, opening his other hand to reveal the test tube nestling in its palm. 'Ordinarily, I'd drink the water now as a sort of finale, but somehow I don't think it's appropriate here.'

Compassion would have yawned at this point if she had been able to feel tired. She did feel bored, but only because the Doctor appeared to be pro-crastinating rather than just getting on with the business. No matter what the situation, there was always that element of the showman in the Doctor that wouldn't lie down. He'd have been just as happy on a Mississippi steamboat in the late nineteenth century, fleecing gullible Earth tourists and gamblers alike with card tricks and peas hidden under nut kernels. He was certainly dressed for it.

'Have you finished with this stuff now, Doctor?' she asked pointedly.

Dotted around them as they sat under the shade on top of the sandcar were a number of strangely designed instruments and devices that had previously been stored inside Compassion's TARDIS body. The extrusion of the equipment from her interior dimension to the outside world had caused quite a stir with Brevus, and had eventually led the Doctor to his little display of sleight of hand. Compassion supposed that he was playing down the hyperdimensional physics of her real-world interface by comparing it to a kid's conjuring trick.

He really annoyed her at times.

'Yes, yes, yes,' muttered the Doctor, irritated at being brought back to deal with such banality. 'You can pack it all away, thanks.'

Compassion withdrew the equipment with a slight whisper of

teleportation, watched with some bemusement by Brevus. She gave him a humourless smile and turned to look out at the desert. That's all I am, now, she thought: a walking, talking, dimensionally transcendental broom cupboard.

'The water is definitely contaminated, then,' said Brevus.

97

'I'm afraid so,' said the Doctor, peering closely at the little test tube. 'The result of the analysis is inarguable. There has to be something in the ice –

those deeper ice fields, at any rate – which is passing through your purification system and entering Baktan's water supply. I'm afraid Compassion's onboard lab isn't up to a detailed breakdown of the contaminants, so I can't tell you *exactly* what it is.'

'I'd hazard a guess that it's alien,' commented Compassion. 'To provoke such a massive genetic disruption, it's unlikely to be anything native to this particular biosphere.'

The Doctor nodded. 'I'd go along with that. And the exact nature of the resultant cellular deformation would imply that the contaminant is capable of rewriting large chunks of Eskoni DNA. There's something down there, all right. In the ice.'

'Sounds nasty,' said Compassion.

'Horrible,' agreed the Doctor.

Brevus shifted nervously in his seat. 'But. . . all this is conjecture, surely?'

'As I said, there's only one way to find out for certain. . . ' The Doctor's eyes were shining with anticipation. 'Go down there and take a look!'

Revan never sat. He moved about all the time, pacing and turning, restless as a tiger. Fitz had been watching him for some time now. He was getting more glimpses of the fiendish visage beneath the grey hood – dark, mottled flesh moist with slime, blank white eyes, and cruelly thin lips. Occasionally he caught glimpses of the needle-like teeth within, and a black tongue. Sometimes, when Revan leaned in close and Fitz could feel the cold dead breath of the mutant on his face, he thought he could see other things – shapes moving beneath

the grey skin, veins that could move like worms.

He felt sick. He was in pain. He wanted, really wanted, to go home now.

Wherever that was – he didn't care. For some reason his mind kept throwing up the image of a flagstone hearth, a comfortable armchair and a stack of books. There was candlelight, plenty of it, and, off to one side, a hexagonal control console made of wood with brass switches and levers and a big central glass column. The Doctor's old TARDIS. Was that home now?

'Are you listening to me?' snarled Revan, grabbing Fitz's face between a set of slippery fingers that had the strength of iron.

'No,' confessed Fitz breathlessly. 'But you should hear what I have to say.'

Revan paused momentarily.

Fitz said, 'I can't tell you anything about Baktan's defences, or whatever it is you want to know. I don't know anything about the place. But I can tell you something about Ckeho.'

98

Revan glanced at the slimer boy who was slumped in the corner, disgusted and afraid. 'Tor Grymna's little secret. What about him?'

'He could be useful to you.'

Revan laughed harshly. 'What as? Something to kick? He's useless as a hostage; those dogs on the Forum must be only too glad to be rid of him.'

Fitz licked his lips, which were now painfully dry. 'Think about it. Ckeho was kept in the city against his will. His father had him locked up in a room in his place. Ckeho *wanted* to come out here. I set him free.'

Revan considered this. 'So?'

'So, OK, he'd make a lousy hostage. But think of his potential as a . . . a propaganda weapon. Not even Tor Grymna's offspring are immune! Anyone could be a slimer! You could really use Ckeho to make people in Baktan think about what the Forum are doing. About what it means

to be a slimer – and live out here.’ Fitz thought it was an impassioned speech, if a little basic and lacking in real impact, but he was talking for his life. And Ckeho’s. Revan had made it clear that life was cheap in the shantytown and two more deaths wouldn’t even be noticed. The looks of resentment and hostility in the pale white eyes of all the other slimers gathered behind Revan were all Fitz needed to tell him that these guys needed no excuse to take it out on an offworld interloper like himself, or Tor Grymna’s son.

‘If you kill Ckeho and me,’ Fitz continued, knowing that this was the decider, ‘then you’ll be doing Tor Grymna and the Forum a favour. If Ckeho’s dead, then there’s nothing left to embarrass Tor Grymna except rumours and hearsay.’

‘And if you were to die?’ grumbled Revan.

‘Well, that would be your biggest mistake. I’m very highly thought of in Baktan. I’m the captain of an interplanetary troubleshooting team sent to Eskon to sort all this out.’

‘Ah,’ said Revan. ‘Good hostage, then.’

‘No! No, no. Absolutely useless hostage, believe me. There’s an antihostage clause in my contract with the Forum. They’re obliged not to care one bit if I’m held hostage.’ Fitz groaned. This was awful. He mustn’t let the situation run away. Get control! ‘Look, Revan, I’ll let you in on a secret, since you’ve refrained from killing us outright. If you want to get back at the Baktan leaders, then Ckeho and I are your best option.’

Revan hissed and turned towards Ckeho, who cringed slightly, but had been following the conversation intently. ‘Is all this true?’

Ckeho nodded. ‘My father disowned me but refused to let me go. He was afraid of what might happen to him if the truth became known that I was a slimer. He will do anything to avoid that happening.’

‘Then,’ said Revan, ‘we must do everything to see that it does.’

99

* * *

Brevus watched Baktan grow larger as they returned from the ice mine. His head was buzzing with the consequences of the Doctor’s assertions, and of strange tricks with glasses of water and

Compassion's. . . unusual abilities.

The Doctor slid on to the bench next to Brevus, shielding his eyes with one hand as he squinted across the furnace-bright desert ahead. Baktan city trembled in the heat-haze.

'I understand that you have to get permission from the Forum,' he said. 'Or Anavolus, at least. And we will need some provisions. But there's something else bothering you about all this, isn't there?'

'I don't want to go down into the caves,' replied Brevus with simple candour.

The Doctor looked at Brevus for a long moment before saying, 'If there is something terrible down there, it won't go away unless we find out what it is and deal with it.'

Brevus gave the Doctor a sour look. 'I'm not scared, Doctor, if that's what you think.'

'I wouldn't blame you if you were. But that isn't what I'm trying to say.' The Doctor thought for a moment, tapping his chin with his fingers and gazing into the distance. Then he said, 'You recognise an ailment by its symptoms. And then you must treat the ailment – otherwise the condition, and the symptoms, just get worse. Now, I always think of fear as just a symptom.'

'I said, I'm not scared.'

'You should be. Because what's down there is the unknown, Brevus, and that's scarier than anything else in the universe. Believe me.'

Brevus shrugged. 'The reason I don't want to go back down in those caves is purely personal, Doctor.'

The Doctor waited for Brevus to say something more, but he didn't. 'You said last night that a man had recently gone missing in the caves. Was he a friend?'

'Yes,' said Brevus with a shudder. 'Graco. I was looking for him when I found you, actually. He had volunteered to go down into the deep caves to check out a problem we'd been having with the steam excavators. There were some other men – miners – who were missing. It's not all that uncommon to lose people down there: it's very treacherous – hard, icy and dark. There are plenty of cracks and gullies. People slip and die. It does happen. But this had been unusual

in that so many experienced men had been lost.’ Brevus sighed.

‘I should have gone down instead of Graco. I knew there was danger. I knew it.’

The Doctor’s eyes narrowed. ‘What sort of danger, Brevus?’

‘I’m not sure. All I know is that one of our most experienced miners, an old-timer called Akestus, came back from the deep ice fields scared half to death.

100

He’d seen something he wouldn’t even talk about. The way things were, no one really wanted to ask him. But he never went back down into the mine again. That’s why I let Graco go down, rather than myself.’

‘What do you think this Akestus fellow saw?’

Brevus considered this for several seconds before replying. ‘I have absolutely no idea.’

‘Then I think we should find out,’ said the Doctor. ‘Don’t you?’

Fitz stood up and brushed the sand from his knees. ‘I don’t want anything to do with this,’ he said.

Revan was already on his feet. ‘I knew you’d never agree. You’re one of Tor Grymna’s friends after all.’

‘No, I’m not. The reason I don’t agree is because your plan is barbaric and cruel.’

‘What the Forum did to us is barbaric and cruel,’ argued the slimer vehemently. ‘This is hardly even payment in kind.’

‘Water is the single most precious commodity on this planet,’ Fitz snapped, rounding on the slimer leader. ‘It is vital to everyone, man, woman or child.

Or slimer. To deprive Baktan of water would be an act of terrorism. I won’t go along with that.’ Even Fitz surprised himself with such an emotional outburst.

But travelling with the Doctor had opened his eyes and his mind to certain things that must not be tolerated.

'I just need to control the ice mine for a short while,' argued Revan. 'Bring the Forum to its senses!'

'To its knees, more like! Revan, the people in that city depend on the mine for everything.'

'That's why it'll work!' Revan twisted around to face Ckeho, who was sitting watching the altercation in silence. 'What do you think?'

Ckeho said, 'Fitz is right, Revan. What you propose sounds more like revenge.'

'Or war,' spat Fitz.

Revan grabbed Fitz and spun him around so they were face to face. His white eyes stared at Fitz, shot through with grey veins. War, then, if that's what you want to call it. Or revenge, for pity's sake! What does it matter what we call it? We have to do something. We'll die like this, all of us, in squalor and shame, scratching around in the dirt like. . . like worms! It's all right for you, Earthman. You're not going to turn into a slimer. Nor is Tor Grymna or Anavolus or most of the rest of Baktan. It's us who've had to take that and deal with it, normal people like me and kids like Ckeho.'

The slimer had turned away now to speak to the rest of the mutants gathered around him. He gestured at Ckeho. 'Even he wanted to come here, 101

because he knew that we belong together. All of us. If we sit out here in the soil of our own making we deserve all we get. But we deserve better than that. We don't have to be victims. We have to make the leaders of Baktan listen to us. And more than that, we have to make them respond. And if that means holding their precious water supply to ransom, then that's what I'll do.

On my own if necessary.'

Fitz shook his head. 'You couldn't do that.'

'I've enough people here who would help' There was a low murmur of approval when Revan said this. He approached Fitz again, his breath hoarse and wet with the exertion. 'Just think for a minute how you would feel if this had happened to you.' He held up his bandaged hands so that Fitz could see the mucus seeping through the filthy material around his fingers. His voice dropped to a ragged whisper. 'Or someone you cared for. Just *think*.'

He stalked away and sat with some of the others, leaving Fitz in the middle of the hut, teeth clenched and heart thumping. Somehow the memory of the Eskoni slave girl, Florence, had entered his head. He could picture her now – simple, beautiful, warm and soft to the touch. The thought of her transforming into one of these. . . monsters revolted him. What the hell was he going to do now? He looked at Ckeho, but the poor kid was just staring up at him, waiting for a lead.

A slimer entered the hut and crossed directly to Revan. There was a brief exchange of guttural words and then Revan stood up to leave. Before he did, he turned back to Fitz. ‘Well?’

‘Nothing’s changed,’ said Fitz. He tried to sound firm. ‘The answer’s still no.’

There was a growl of dismay from the crowd. Fitz felt his cheeks burning.

Was he letting these people down? He couldn’t tell. He sympathised with their plight, but Revan was so aggressive, so hateful. But was that so surprising?

Wouldn’t he, Fitz, feel just as angry if the same thing had happened to him?

‘Look,’ Fitz said, trying to sound calm and considered. ‘I don’t know what the answer is. I’m sorry about what’s happened here, I really am. But I don’t think this is the way.’

‘You’re sorry?’ repeated Revan acidly. ‘It’s all a question of degree, Earthman. You’re just not sorry enough, that’s all. Come and look at this, though.’

Maybe it’ll help make up your mind.’

Frowning, Fitz followed him out of the hut with some of the other slimers and Ckeho in tow. They were taken to a nearby tent, where a large number of slimers were gathered. A low, keening moan had risen up on the warm fetid air. The smell of decay was everywhere, and it made Fitz gag.

‘We have a miserable existence out here,’ Revan said to him on the threshold of the tent. ‘But when we die, it gets worse. This man was struck down by a 102

metal bolt from one of the Custodians’ handbows this morning. His

name is Garek. He's about to die.'

Revan ducked inside the tent. 'I don't think I should be here,' said Fitz. He was aware of Ckeho close by. The air was thick with grim expectation and a terrible stench. Fitz tried to turn, but he had been hemmed in by the crowd of slimers, all moaning, their teeth glittering. He felt Revan grab his arm and pull him down into the tent.

They were holding Garek down, but it took four of them. He was thrashing about as if trying to escape, not at all like someone about to die. Fitz wanted to tell them to let him go, but something stopped him.

It was the sight of Garek's flesh moving beneath the strips of material that still clung to his slippery hide. As if his *insides* were trying to escape. It must have been agonising, by the look on the slimer's face and the incoherent howl of anguish he suddenly let forth from a mouth clotted with spittle.

Then the things came out.

They poked out of his mouth like fingers, as if there were a hand inside his throat trying to escape. The fingers kept coming, twisting and scrabbling, pulling themselves free, slipping down his neck and chest like eels. Dark-green ooze surged out over the slimer's lips, bringing more wriggling things with it. Some of them fell on to the ground and began to writhe madly in the sand.

By now Garek was dead, but he hadn't stopped moving. Black blood was running from his nose and ears as his head jerked spasmodically. Suddenly his lower jaw tore away as something big pushed out with massive force from his neck. Fitz glimpsed a blood-slicked snake uncoiling just before a rock smashed it back down.

Revan stood over the corpse, his hands still on the rock. Whatever was left inside Garek convulsed and then died. The others were using sticks and rocks and sometimes their feet to kill the things squirming in the sand.

Fitz felt himself led from the tent, where he collapsed outside and stared at nothing for several minutes. Ckeho touched him and he jumped away, revolted.

'It's how they – we – die,' Ckeho said quietly.

Revan's voice growled nearby: 'No one knows why it happens like

that. We live with these things inside us, and when we die they are born.'

'Wh-what are they?' stammered Fitz thickly.

'I don't know,' said Revan. 'No one knows.'

Fitz closed his eyes but he couldn't stop seeing it happen. Lord, what a way to go.

'So what's your answer now, Earthman?' asked Revan. 'Are you for us, or against us?'

103

Chapter Fifteen

Fear of the Dark

Tor Grymna swept into the Forum chamber like a thundercloud, unleashing a ferocious storm of anger towards Anavolus and Old Krumm.

'By Dallufvir's moon, Tor Grymna, what's the matter?' gasped Anavolus, struggling to his feet.

Tor Grymna's dark cloak swirled around his feet as he reached the centre of the chamber and spun on his heel. Old Krumm had stirred from his slumber and was staring up at the gloomy apparition with a look of heart-stopping fear. 'What in the name of –'

'Be silent!' Tor Grymna's voice filled the room like sand in a bucket. Old Krumm cringed in his chair, his rheumy eyes bulging in their crusted sockets.

'Tor Grymna,' Anavolus responded with an equally raised voice. 'Desist with this behaviour! I will not tolerate it in this room.'

Tor Grymna's nostrils flared as he tried to control his temper. The veins stood out beneath the short fur on his forehead and neck.

Anavolus limped over to him and looked into the burning black eyes. 'You're among friends, here, Tor Grymna,' he said in a softer tone. 'Remember?'

For a moment Tor Grymna did not speak. Then, when he opened his mouth to do so, an involuntary sob of frustration was released. 'He's

gone, Anavolus!’

he growled. ‘Ckeho has escaped.’

When the Doctor, Compassion and Brevus returned to Baktan, the shantytown around its base was surprisingly quiet. The Custodians on the gate reported no disturbances, but there was an atmosphere of muted tension to be felt as the sandcar wound its way through the ramshackle community. There were some slimers to be seen, but they were either cowering in their tents or just turned away as the sandcar passed. It was noticeably quiet.

‘It’s odd,’ whispered the Doctor. ‘Like the calm before the storm.’

‘Something’s up,’ murmured Compassion.

Brevus said. ‘Last month, a caravan from Keushf city was raided by the slimers as it passed through to Baktan. Goods were stolen, caravans looted, people stoned and injured. The mood was ugly for days afterwards. But before it happened, it felt like this.’

105

‘The fuse is burning,’ said Compassion simply. ‘Timer’s running. They’re going to blow.’

‘Perhaps Fitz –’ began the Doctor with a note of concern. He didn’t finish the sentence, just peered into the shantytown to see if he could see any sign of his companion.

‘They wouldn’t be as quiet as this if they’d done anything to him,’ said Compassion. ‘They’d have his head on a stick by now.’

‘How would you know?’ snapped the Doctor.

Compassion just shrugged. ‘Only trying to make you feel better.’

‘Well you’re not.’

‘They might have had one of their rituals,’ Brevus said quietly. ‘They can become pretty subdued afterwards.’

‘Rituals?’

‘I don’t know exactly what goes on,’ Brevus said. ‘No one does. But there are stories, rumours. Sacrifices, mainly.’

‘Wonderful,’ said Compassion.

‘Please try to be quiet,’ said the Doctor. ‘Go on, Brevus.’

‘They work each other into a frenzy or something and then the killing starts.

It’s disgusting. They call it the Squirming.’

The Doctor looked out again at the mess of tents and hovels as they huddled beneath the blazing eye of the sun, almost as if they were cringing in shame and depravation. Or poverty and exploitation.

‘Maybe they’ve eaten Fitz,’ suggested Compassion, only to receive a black look from the Doctor.

‘This is serious,’ said Anavolus, walking back to his chair and sitting down heavily.

‘Do you think I’m not aware of that?’ hissed Tor Grymna. He was still pacing around the room, his huge chest rising and falling with emotion. His large hands were in fists as if he were ready to fight.

Anavolus tapped his fingers nervously on the handle of his walking stick, his mind reeling. ‘We always knew there was a chance of this, Tor Grymna –

that someone might find out.’

Tor Grymna whirled on him. ‘*No one* has found out!’

‘Yet,’ said old Krumm.

Tor Grymna gave him a venomous look. ‘Ckeho has been set free. Doubtless he has fled to the shantytown to join the rest of his kind. But no one in Baktan knows anything about him.’

‘Except the person who set him free,’ Old Krumm pointed out.

There was an evil twinkle in the old man’s eyes that Tor Grymna didn’t appreciate. ‘It must have been the Doctor, or one of his associates,’ he asserted.

‘Let us think carefully about this before we start hurling accusations,’ advised Anavolus. He rapped his stick on the marble floor for

attention. 'Are you sure that Ckeho could not have arranged his own escape?'

'Of course he couldn't!'

'You are sure he couldn't have worked out a way to unlock the door?' Anavolus pressed. 'Or perhaps you overlooked something when you left the room.'

'You have been working very late these past few nights,' agreed Old Krumm.

'People make mistakes when they are tired.'

'Then the whole of Baktan must have been very tired the day they voted you on to the Forum,' responded Tor Grymna.

'That's enough!' snapped Anavolus. 'This is a time for hard thinking and ready action, not for bickering and insults. Old Kr- er, Krumm has a valid point, Tor Grymna. Are you sure that Ckeho's escape is not merely the result of an unlucky accident?'

Tor Grymna sighed deeply. 'I am absolutely certain, Anavolus. You must take my word on that.'

'I do, old friend, I do. But your assertion that the Doctor and his friends might be responsible cannot be true.'

'Why not? Where were they all night?'

'Well,' started Anavolus, and then paused when he realised that he could not effectively account for the actions of the offworlders during the hours of darkness. 'Well, the evidence is circumstantial to say the least. You cannot prove it was any one of them.'

'I will,' Tor Grymna assured him dangerously.

'Surely culpability is not the issue,' said Old Krumm. 'The real peril lies in the simple fact of Ckeho's existence, in or out of Tor Grymna's apartment.'

'That is perfectly true,' said Anavolus. 'There has always been the possibility of discovery, while Ckeho still lived.'

For a moment, Tor Grymna halted what had been his otherwise incessant movement around the chamber. He turned the full bore of his dark gaze on Anavolus, apparently set to explode his full wrath on

the senior Forum member, but at the last second failed to do so. He let out his breath with a low growl instead, his wide shoulders actually slumping in defeat. ‘Do you honestly believe that I could. . . could ever. . . have done away with my own. . .

with him? Do you?’

‘Tor Grymna, we have never believed you capable of such an act,’ Anavolus assured him gently. ‘Your position was as impossible as it was unenviable right from the start. But. . . you are too valuable a member of the Forum to lose.

Especially now. Baktan needs your skill, your expertise, your resolute will to see it through these difficult times.’

‘What are you saying?’ rumbled the Eskoni.

107

‘If the people discover the truth about Ckeho, a truth that you have wilfully kept from them for all this time, then not even our confidence in you will allow you to continue to hold a position on the Forum. Your leadership over the slimer business has been as courageous as it is resolute, but it flies in the face of your own personal circumstances. No elected representative of the people could survive in a position rendered untenable.’

Tor Grymna sighed. ‘You are saying that I must take some kind of action –

precipitate action.’

Precisely that,’ Anavolus nodded.

‘The only question’, added Old Krumm, ‘is *what* action?’

‘The Forum cannot see us now,’ Brevus told the Doctor and Compassion.

‘Cannot or will not?’ wondered Compassion.

They were standing in the corridor outside the peripheral rooms housing the Forum proper. The doors were closed and guarded by Tor Grymna’s men.

They were armed with handbows and batons, although they were not drawn.

‘I don’t know,’ said Brevus. ‘They’re in some kind of emergency meeting. I don’t know what it’s about, and the Custodians are refusing to say. Probably they don’t know either.’

The Doctor and Compassion exchanged a look. ‘All right,’ said the Doctor eventually. ‘But are you sure we can’t proceed without official sanction? I’ve never been one for red tape.’

‘Red tape?’

‘Forget it,’ advised Compassion. ‘What he means is, why can’t we just go?’

Now?’

‘Well, for one thing it’s getting late,’ said Brevus. ‘By the time we got everything together and got back to the ice mine, it would be dark.’

‘That would hardly matter underground,’ Compassion pointed out acidly.

‘It would matter to the men who came with us.’

‘What men?’

‘Whatever it is down in those deep caves,’ said Brevus firmly, ‘I am not prepared to meet it without a full complement of Custodians and provisions.’

‘Sometimes a small group can travel more quickly, and more clandestinely,’

Compassion observed. ‘Just the three of us. Or just the Doctor and me, if you don’t like the sound of that. Or better still, just me.’

‘No, no, no,’ interrupted the Doctor suddenly, appearing to emerge from a trance. ‘Brevus is right – we have to do this properly. We need the backing of the Forum, or at least Uncle Anavolus. And we will need specialist equipment and supplies.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ said Compassion.

108

‘And there is something else we can do while we wait for the Forum to stop arguing.’

‘If you’re going to suggest a cup of tea, I’m leaving right now.’

‘Tea would be nice,’ agreed the Doctor blithely, ‘but what I was actually proposing was a visit to Akestus, the old miner who last returned from the deep caves.’

‘Why?’ asked Brevus.

‘Because,’ said the Doctor, already leading them away from the Forum chambers, ‘he might be able to tell us something useful, you never know.’

And besides, I always like to hear what old men have to say.’

‘Burn the shantytown to the ground,’ said Tor Grymna levelly. There wasn’t even the barest tremor in his voice. ‘Level it. Destroy it, and everything in it.’

There was silence in the Forum chamber for several seconds.

‘Tor Grymna, are you serious?’ asked Anavolus with equal candour.

‘Never more so.’

Anavolus licked his lips and nervously tapped his fingers on the handle of his stick. ‘What would be the benefits of such an action?’

‘Everyone knows that the slimers represent a menace to our society,’ explained Tor Grymna. ‘They carry disease, they are violent and behave like criminals. Their very existence now threatens Baktan’s trade with other Eskoni people. Baktan itself has been put at risk. This cannot be tolerated any longer. They have left us with no other option, but the final one. Annihilation.’

‘That could be problematical,’ Anavolus said without any sense of irony.

‘No important decisions are easy,’ replied Tor Grymna.

‘But still, complete destruction. . . It is tantamount to murder. What about your son, Ckeho?’

Tor Grymna closed his eyes briefly. When they opened, they glistened with determination. ‘If he has gone there, then he has made his decision. It is what he wants. But we cannot allow the slimer problem to continue unchecked. . .

and I cannot allow my son to be used against me.'

'How would you go about it?'

'I wouldn't,' replied Tor Grymna. 'But the Doctor might.'

Anavolus frowned. 'The Doctor? He doesn't strike me as the slaughtering type, Tor Grymna.'

'Perhaps not, but what are the rest of the people of Baktan to think?'

'Only what we tell them,' realised Old Krumm.

Akestus was a wire-thin Eskoni, old but firm with his skin leathery where years spent toiling underground had worn away his fur. His thin grey hair was long 109

and matted, and devoid of the usual beads and twine that most of his species liked to wear.

He welcomed Brevus into his home, which was on one of the lower levels of Baktan as apparently befitted his somewhat humble status. He regarded the Doctor and Compassion with some suspicion, though, which was probably more to do with their alien appearance than anything else.

It was gloomy but very warm in Akestus's place, and not a little cramped.

Ornaments and mementos and all the assorted bric-a-brac that old age accumulates decorated every surface. There were papers and devices spread out on most of the chairs and they had to clear a space for themselves in order to sit down. The room smelled musty and lived in.

The Doctor afforded the old-timer his most engaging smile, and let Brevus carry out the necessary introductions. No sooner had the Doctor taken a seat, however, than a serpentine creature covered in orange-and-black-striped fur clambered up his leg and on to his knee using a multitude of spindly legs. The creature let out a tiny gargling whine and curled up contentedly in his lap.

'What is it?' asked Compassion.

'That's Baan,' said Akestus. 'Don't mind him, he's just a silly old fool, like me.'

'It's a nedipom,' explained Brevus.

The Doctor was grinning hugely. 'It's like a giant caterpillar!' He gave it a little stroke with one finger.

'I'd offer you all something to drink,' announced Akestus, 'but times are hard these days.' He spoke with a surprisingly firm voice. The Doctor had expected a feeble tone.

'That's quite all right,' replied the Doctor. 'I'm afraid this isn't simply a social call.'

Akestus spared Brevus a quick glance. 'That I can believe.'

'You don't mind us coming to see you?' asked the Doctor gently.

'I can't stop you. Although I don't usually have much to do with doctors, as a rule.' Akestus tried to sit a little straighter in his chair, puffing out his chest.

'Eighty years working in an ice mine makes you good and strong. I can still bend a hosfer bar with my bare hands.'

'Can you really?' the Doctor did his best to sound impressed.

Compassion fidgeted, already bored with this pointless small talk. 'We wanted to ask you about something,' she said.

'And I can guess what,' replied Akestus with a dry chuckle. He looked at Brevus with a more sour expression. 'What've you been telling them, boy?'

'Only the truth.'

'Which doesn't amount to very much,' the Doctor said. 'I'd like you to tell us some more.'

110

'About the deep caves.' Akestus nodded, and a sad, rather faraway look entered his tawny eyes. 'I can't tell you much, really.'

'Can't or won't?' asked Compassion.

The Doctor raised his fingers minutely to signal her to be quiet. He stared into Akestus's eyes, deeply. 'Come on, Akestus. You can tell us.'

'No.'

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t want to. I haven’t got very. . . happy memories of that place. I’d rather you left.’

Akestus tried to look away from the offworlder’s steady gaze, but felt unable to break the connection. It was as if those azure alien eyes held him fixed to his seat. They were like perfect circles of turquoise gemstone, surrounding a disc of purest, deepest black.

As Akestus watched, the dark pupils seemed to suddenly expand, and he could hear the Doctor’s voice, very pleasant, very firm but precise, saying,

‘Tell us about it, Akestus. Tell us all about it. You know you want to.’

Akestus licked his lips, but they were dry ‘I can remember, but I try not to,’

he told them simply. ‘It was not all that long ago. We were exploring the deep caves for ice – our instruments told us that there should be a vast ice reservoir locked beneath a certain level. It was difficult to get to, but we had to go ourselves.

‘Not even the knivors came down that far. It was very quiet – and dark of course. Very, very dark.’ Akestus’s eyes closed and his brows creased as he recalled the events. ‘We. . . we went on, determined to find the ice lake. It was so cold. We could feel it nearby. Some of the others. . . they wanted to go back. Maybe they were scared. It was so dark, and as cold as can be. But I wanted to go on. . . ’

Akestus shivered slightly, as if he could feel the drop in temperature again.

He still hadn’t opened his eyes, thought that we’d reached the centre of the world. No one had ever been down this far – but I knew what we’d find.

Perfect ice. That’s what we used to call the big lakes. And I was going to find the biggest, purest berg there was – the cold heart of the planet itself.’

‘Rubbish,’ murmured Compassion.

‘Shh,’ said the Doctor.

‘That’s when it happened,’ continued Akestus. He was frowning deeply now, and his lips were pulled back from old brown teeth in distress. ‘I can still hear the screams of my men even now.’

The Doctor blinked. ‘What happened?’ he whispered.

111

‘I don’t know,’ said Akestus, opening his eyes. But he wasn’t looking out.

He was looking back, deep into his memories. ‘It was so dark. And so cold. I couldn’t see anything. But I heard them screaming. Screaming as they went.’

‘Went where?’ asked Compassion.

‘Into the blackness’ Akestus began to weep, his shoulders hunching up and trembling.

The Doctor leaned forward and placed a hand on the old man's shoulder.

'It's all right. Shh. It's OK.' The nedipom creature on his lap uncoiled itself and scabbled off his leg. The Doctor knelt down quickly by Akestus and put his arm around him. 'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.' He gently put his hand flat on the top of the Eskoni's head, his fingers spread wide, and said, very quietly into his ear, 'Go to sleep. Go to sleep.'

Brevus watched in fascination as the Doctor lowered Akestus back into his chair so that he lay comfortable and completely unconscious. As the old-timer began to snore loudly, the Doctor removed his hand from his head and smiled sadly. 'I think we'd better go now.'

'That was pointless,' said Compassion as they made their way back through the city to the Doctor's rooms.

'No, it wasn't,' stated the Doctor emphatically. 'Akestus told us all he could.'

'Which wasn't much!'

'Fear does that to you, sometimes,' was the Doctor's only comment. He was chewing absently at his lower lip as they rode up an escalator.

'Well, I did say he had been badly affected by his experiences, Doctor,' said Brevus. I don't know how much faith you can put in his story – what there was of it.'

'Brevus, I'm impressed by anything that can instil so much fear in such a strong, brave man,' the Doctor retorted. 'It takes courage and nerves of steel to work underground in those kinds of conditions. Akestus did it all his life, and he's as strong as an ox. But *something* finally scared him down in those caves.' An intense look had entered the Doctor's eyes. 'And it must be dealt with.'

112

Chapter Sixteen

Eve of Disaster

From the top of Baktan, the shantytown was almost impossible to see. But, rising on the warm air currents that sailed up the side of the great

rock city from the desert, there was a smell that Tor Grymna thought he could sometimes detect: the faintest whiff of corruption.

He was looking out now from the windows of the Forum, which was as close to the top of Baktan as anyone could get. He had come this far, although in truth the journey for an Eskon from his family background had not been great. It was an immense drop, though, dizzying and lethal. He couldn't survive that, and Anavolus had been perfectly correct when he had said that Baktan needed Tor Grymna more than anything. It was his duty to the city, and its people – *his* people, perhaps, one day – to see that he remained in a position where he could benefit everyone.

The slimers had to be dealt with, permanently.

He wrinkled his greying nose as he thought of the creatures and their abysmal ways. He had actually ventured out into the shantytown once, when it was only half the size it was now, in an effort to persuade its leaders to take the mutant community out into the desert. That would have been the decent thing to do, the obvious solution. It would have saved everyone a lot of trouble.

But the slimers had already found themselves a spokesman. 'Leader' was too dignified a word for him. Tor Grymna remembered his name quite clearly: Revan. He could even recall his insistent, sucking voice and the memory made him shudder. He had not told anyone else on the Forum about Revan.

He preferred them to believe that the slimers were a disorganised rabble of mutant brigands, thieves and degenerates. Which they were, of course. But Revan had worried Tor Grymna for a while. Now all this had come to a head, and it was time to finish it once and for all. Disposing of Revan as well as all his slimers was a bonus.

And as for Ckeho. . . Well, Tor Grymna had long ago learned the benefit of ignoring one's own personal feelings in matters of great civil importance. He had always put his own emotions and needs behind those of his city, and he must do so now.

113

'We are decided then,' said Anavolus. He was standing just behind Tor Grymna, who had not heard him approach, he was so wrapped up in his own thoughts. Not even the click of the older man's stick on the floor had broken through his rumination.

Tor Grymna took a deep breath. He had not failed to notice the tone of dismay, almost disquiet, in Anavolus's words, and he realised it was up to him to persuade his old friend that the Forum had, once again, taken its first step down a necessary but difficult road.

'We've no other option,' he said lowly. Regretfully, even. 'I hadn't wanted it to come to this. Truly. But there are some things against which we must make a stand, or perish.'

Anavolus merely offered a solemn nod.

His gaze was also drawn out

through the stained-glass windows at the brilliance of the day beyond. 'Why do I feel that this is so wrong?' he asked eventually, his voice barely above a whisper. It seemed as though he were almost talking to himself.

Tor Grymna raised an eyebrow. 'We are faced with a dilemma, old friend: tell the people of Baktan, who trust us implicitly, the truth about Ckeho and cause a damaging political scandal that will see me summarily removed from office; or do what we should have done a long time ago, right at the very beginning, and come down hard on the slimers before any real trouble can start. The Doctor is stirring things up down there even as we speak; with Ckeho loose as well the results could be disastrous.'

Anavolus shook his head. 'I cannot help but think that the Doctor is a good man, Tor Grymna.'

'It does not matter,' was the simple reply. 'Our future – the future of Baktan

– is all that matters. The slimers' foul mutant stench even reaches up here, Anavolus. Imagine what disease those vapours may be carrying.' Tor Grymna began to walk slowly around the Forum chamber, his eyes on the floor as he spoke.

'I sometimes think that the slimers are of our own making. Oh, radiation from the solar flare may have acted as some sort of catalyst to the process, but the seeds, the germs of their creation, were already within us. Why else would they emerge so suddenly from good, young, healthy Eskoni? The mutations are a warning, and a punishment. They are the dreadful result of breeding with lowborns. Illicit couplings between male Eskoni and female slaves. Who knows what deprived genetic breakdowns may be the result of such unions?

We do, now. The slimers.'

'But. . . Tor Grymna, Ckeho is your own son. What are you saying?'

Anavolus, you are my oldest and closest friend. I have loved you as a brother all my life. But can I ask you to forgive an old hypocrite like me?

Someone you will want to disown in the way my family disowned me?
I slept 114

with a slave, Anavolus.' Tor Grymna's mighty voice cracked with emotion. 'It should never have happened. . . '

Anavolus was confused. 'But your wife – she bore Ckeho. He was not the spawn of any slave, surely?'

'Perhaps not directly. But who can know what cursed infection that slave girl could have passed to me – and thence to my offspring?'

'Tor Grymna, this is nonsense!' Anavolus's voice shook with rage. 'Whatever the cause of the mutations, it is nothing to do with you, or any impropriety.

We may never know the truth. But you must not punish yourself for it.'

'I don't have to,' said Tor Grymna. 'I am punished enough as it is.'

Later in the evening of that day, the Doctor was finally granted an audience with the Forum. He swept into the chamber with Compassion in tow, and Brevus trying to hurry in before him as protocol would normally require.

There was an odd atmosphere in the Forum chamber that the Doctor detected instantly: not exactly tension, but a definite strain. Anavolus, Tor Grymna and Old Krumm were all formally seated, their faces impassive, and the air was decidedly cool.

'Well, you're a sorrowful-looking bunch,' said the Doctor.

He tossed a

screwed-up paper bag at Tor Grymna, who caught it instinctively. 'Have a mint humbug.'

Tor Grymna peered into the bag with some trepidation, but the Doctor

was already talking again. 'We've seen the slimers, and a pretty unfriendly lot they were too. You were quite right on that score. I had a little chat with someone called Revan.'

A little chat? mouthed Compassion silently at Brevus, who shrugged nervously.

'Revan?' echoed Anavolus.

'Leader of the slimers, sort of,' explained the Doctor. 'Not very pleasant company, I admit, and prone to unnecessary belligerence, but he does have some very valid grievances.'

'The slimers have been unhinged by their mutation,' said Tor Grymna evenly. His eyes never left the Doctor. 'Understandable, in the circumstances.'

'Yes, yes, yes. But that doesn't necessarily mean that they aren't the victims here. Revan's intent on causing trouble for you, I'm afraid, and I can't say I blame him.'

'Really?' Tor Grymna said dryly.

'But that', continued the Doctor, raising a finger in emphasis, 'is not what I've come to warn you about.'

'What have you come to warn us about?' asked Anavolus patiently.

115

'There's something down in the deep caves beneath the ice mine,' replied the Doctor. His voice, light but clipped, commanded everyone's attention.

Compassion secretly marvelled at his ability to talk apparent rubbish with a straight face.

'I don't know what it is yet,' the Doctor went on, 'but it has infected the lowermost ice reservoirs that you have been thawing and using for Baktan's water supply. Something in that water has caused a genetic anomaly in the Eskoni reproductive cycle. The result is a sudden, massive mutation of the normal cell structure, probably triggered by hormonal changes. I haven't had time to come up with the details, because I think time is something we don't have a lot of. We need to find out exactly what it is lurking down in the caves, and quickly.'

There was a shocked silence.

‘If you don’t get this thing sorted soon, it’s going to cause a real problem for your long-term survival,’ said Compassion sharply. ‘How long do you think you’ll last when every single one of your children turns into a slimer? Because that’s what’s going to happen.’

‘You’re sure about this, Doctor?’ asked Anavolus.

The Doctor took a deep breath. ‘We have to get down in those caves and find the cause of the infection. If we can stop it in time, your population might stand a chance of recovery.’

‘Go down?’ queried Tor Grymna. ‘Into the caves?’

‘I’d’ve gone alone, but Brevus here thinks we’ll need proper supplies, men, equipment, that sort of thing.’

‘It would be a difficult mission as it is,’ Brevus admitted.

‘Impossible without them. Arrangements will have to be made.’

‘And for that apparently we need the permission of your good selves,’ the Doctor added. ‘In any case –’

‘Of course,’ said Tor Grymna. ‘Yes, of course. Make any arrangements that are necessary, Brevus. Immediately. Take whatever equipment you need.’

‘But –’ Anavolus began. ‘This is ridiculous, Tor Grymna.’

‘Not at all,’ Tor Grymna declared. ‘It’s a possibility we’ve overlooked, you have to admit.’ He stood up with some vigour and clasped the Doctor by the hand. ‘You can leave in the morning – at first light, yes?’

‘Yes, if you like.’ The Doctor grinned uncertainly and shook the Eskoni’s large hand in return.

‘Have you finally taken leave of your senses, Tor Grymna?’ spluttered Anavolus as the Forum Chamber emptied and the three leaders were left alone.

‘On the contrary. This is exactly what we want. If we are to stamp out the slimers for good, then we need the Doctor and his friends out of the way.’

Where better than at the bottom of an ice mine?’

‘You don’t believe the Doctor’s theory, then?’

‘Do you?’

‘I’m not certain what to believe any more.’ Anavolus sighed wearily. ‘You are certain that this is what you want, Tor Grymna?’

‘As you yourself agreed, there is no other option.’

‘I like the Doctor, Tor Grymna. I respect his intellect and his experience.

And he trusts us. But we cannot allow him to stand in the way of the good of Baktan, and that duty is entrusted to us alone. I hope the Doctor returns from his mission safely and successfully – but I don’t want him here when you deal with the slimers.’

Tor Grymna nodded. ‘I understand. I shall arrange for a contingent of Custodians to accompany him on the expedition, to ensure his safety.’

‘Thank you,’ said Anavolus. ‘Thank you.’

‘Well, that was easier than I had expected,’ said Brevus as they left the Forum chamber.

‘Tor Grymna was practically falling over himself to get you out of his hair, Doctor,’ agreed Compassion.

The Doctor strode briskly ahead, his footsteps sounding lightly on the flight of stairs that led down to the next level. ‘I don’t believe in looking a gift horse in the mouth,’ he called back over his shoulder. ‘Come on, we’ve got work to do.’

‘Hold on a minute,’ Compassion urged. ‘Don’t you think that was all a bit suspicious?’

The Doctor stopped and considered the matter. ‘Probably,’ he said finally.

‘*Probably?*’

‘Yes, probably. But what can I do? We wanted to go down to investigate those deep caves, and now we can.’

‘But Tor Grymna and Anavolus –’

‘Are politicians, Compassion. Their whole life is spent furthering their own personal causes and interests. Look at Tor Grymna. We know he’s got something to hide. He and Anavolus have already spent the best part of today locked in secret discussions. They will have been doing all they can to save their own necks. We have to do all we can to save everybody else’s.’

‘He’s right,’ said Brevus. ‘I’ll get things organised for first thing in the morning.’

As Eskon’s giant sun dipped slowly below the blur of the planet’s horizon, and long purple shadows stole across its scarlet surface, Fitz Kreiner lay on a thin mattress of rags and stared up at the darkening sky. He could see the lights of 117

Baktan from here, tiny pinpricks rearing up into the gloom that was the giant rock of the city. It looked warm and safe in there.

Out here it was warm and fraught with danger. The mattress on which he lay was infested with insects. Rodent lizards crept around his legs and scuttled down the tracks between the plastic sheeting that formed his hopeless shelter.

There was sand and dust everywhere, and the smell of the slimers.

He didn’t want to fall asleep, although his body was crying out for rest. He couldn’t afford to even shut his eyes, in case he saw them again. The images.

Anaemic things wriggling at his feet, blind and mad.

No, I mustn’t think about it. Concentrate on Baktan, he told himself. Think about the nice room you had there, and the Doctor, and even Compassion.

Yes, even spending some time with her would be better than this.

Think of Florence.

She’s up there, in the city. Maybe she’s looking out of one of those little squares of light, wondering where you are and what you’re doing. You can tell her all about it, when you see her again.

Or perhaps not.

Chapter Seventeen

The Expedition

Tor Grymna's men were commanded by a muscular Eskoni named Mekulo.

His long nose had once been broken, in a fight allegedly, and left him with a somewhat crooked expression. He remained dour and noncommittal during the preparations to leave, almost as if he considered the expedition a trivial waste of his men's talents. He nodded tersely when told that he was to take instructions from Brevus, and, after him, the Doctor.

Brevus was relieved to find that Zela was acting as Mekulo's second-in-command. He at least knew Brevus and was easier to communicate with.

Two sandcars were loaded up with men and supplies; the equipment included ropes, climbing tackle, electric torches and, perversely, cold-weather gear. As the sun broke cover and hurled its first onslaught of the day's heat, the sandcars crawled out from the shadow of Baktan and headed for the ice mine.

'Did you see that?' asked the Doctor, pulling himself back level with Compassion. He had been leaning over the side of the sandcar, peering down at the ground surrounding the outer gates of the city.

Compassion nodded. 'The cracks are wider.'

'More subterranean activity?' wondered Brevus.

'Undoubtedly,' responded the Doctor, thoughtfully stroking his upper lip. 'I wonder why we haven't felt any tremors.'

'I have,' said Compassion. 'During the night. Very minor, but there was definitely geological movement.'

'Really?' The Doctor's eyes were wide. 'I wonder why I didn't feel it.'

'Probably you were too busy running around arranging things.'

'Well I didn't exactly have much in the way of help,' the Doctor replied tersely. 'Where did you get to, anyway, if you didn't sleep?'

‘Nowhere,’ said Compassion dully. She leaned forward in her seat and let her gaze travel across the desert. ‘Where can I go?’

‘Come on, we’re off.’ Fitz spoke just loudly enough for Ckeho to hear him. He didn’t want to have to touch him to wake him up. He didn’t know what he 119

would do if he felt something *move* beneath the kid’s skin. The mucus was bad enough.

Ckeho opened his cream-white eyes and blinked stickily.

‘Don’t make a sound,’ Fitz whispered as the slimer’s eyes widened in sudden fear. ‘Come with me, and be quiet about it.’

Fitz turned and walked off, thankful that the sand cushioned the noise of any movement. The slimer town was still, quiet in the sunrise, waiting for the horror and depravation of a new day.

Fitz had thought about leaving without Ckeho. It would have been easier on his own, for a kick-off. He could have made it back to the city gates and probably talked his way in without much trouble. With Ckeho in tow that might be a problem, but, when the time had finally come when Fitz felt able to move, he found he couldn’t leave the kid behind.

For one thing Ckeho was terrified. The business with the dying slimer last night had scared him as much as it had scared Fitz – probably more so. But Fitz hated to see him shivering with fear in the night, a huddled-up ball of rags and coughs. When the slimer had finally fallen asleep, he’d cried out incessantly and uselessly against whatever nightmares were being played out in his mind. If they were as bad as the reality of his situation, then he had Fitz’s sympathy.

And then there was his dad.

Fitz’s youth had been made painful and desperate by the knowledge that his own father had been German, a deeply unpopular nationality in postwar Britain. Ten, even fifteen years on, World War Two still counted for a hell of a lot in England, and growing up there having a ‘Kraut’ for a father was not an advantage in any way. So Fitz felt a certain link with Ckeho that was difficult to ignore.

And finally, just possibly, he was going soft in his old age. Here he was, on his own, surrounded by unfriendly natives, trying to do the decent thing.

What the hell! Clint Eastwood would've been proud.

'Where d'you think you two are off to, then?' A turgid voice rang out through the early-morning heat and Fitz skidded to a halt.

Revan stood before them, still playing with the handbow bolt Fitz had seen pierce the slimer's shoulder the night of his arrival in Baktan.

For a moment Fitz thought about trying to talk his way out. He actually took a breath in readiness. But, when he opened his mouth to speak, he just yelled, 'Run!' at Ckeho and legged it.

Maybe Revan and his pals hadn't been expecting such a direct attempt to evade them, or maybe the slimers just didn't move very fast. Either way, with a surprising break of speed, Fitz shot past the nearest mutant and disappeared into the twisting alleys and passages of the shantytown. He hoped Ckeho was 120

with him, or at least had the sense to split up from him and make his own way.

He jumped over heaps of rubbish and debris as he ran, jerking left and right almost at random, switching direction whenever he saw a slimer ahead.

Without a co-ordinated plan to stop him or even cut him off, Fitz soon found that he had a definite advantage.

'Got you!' cried a slimer, clamping a thick paw around his arm as he hurtled past an opening. Fitz's momentum pulled the slimer out of his hiding place and brought him crashing down into the sand. They rolled together and Fitz scrambled to his feet, still trying to keep his pace up. But the slimer had him by the leg now, and powerful fingers were digging into the flesh of his calf.

With a yell Fitz felt the pain of his knivor bite flare up. He lashed out at the slimer with the heel of his other foot, catching the thing a sharp blow to the face. The mutant's hood slid back to reveal a shapeless grey head wet with slime. A circular mouth yawned open, full of tiny teeth.

Fitz kicked again, and again, until he felt the grip weaken. With a savage burst of energy he pulled himself free and staggered forward. No good limping! Just run!

He dived down another alley, weaving to and fro. He clambered up

the side of a collapsed hut and ran helter-skelter along the roofs of its neighbours, aware that at any moment his weight might bring them down in a bone-breaking crash. He glimpsed slimers running parallel with him along the alley on either side. Where now? Which way?

He reached the end of the line of huts and leapt into space. He smashed into a raised walkway opposite, scattering planks of wood and bits of rubbish, slipped and hit the dirt. His feet sent up a great spray of sand as he struggled to stand up. Then he collided with another slimer.

‘Fitz! It’s me!’ Ckeho cried as he tried to tear himself free.

‘Ckeho?’ Fitz gasped. ‘Come on!’

‘We’re nearly there!’ croaked the slimer, grabbing Fitz by the hand and pulling him towards a wide-open space. For a second Fitz thought it was a trap. Ambush. Perfect place! But then he saw, just across the way, the gates of Baktan.

There were a couple of Eskoni Custodians standing there.

They trudged on, legs like lead weights. It was so near, but it seemed to take ages to close the gap. Their feet sank into the soft sand, refusing any purchase. ‘Come on!’ roared Fitz, and together they pulled each other towards the Eskoni.

One of the guards raised his handbow as he saw Ckeho approaching, yelling. But the sight of Fitz – clearly not a slimer, but equally not an Eskoni –

confused him. He hesitated, unsure whether to defend himself.

121

‘Don’t,’ Fitz snapped, and, almost without thinking, he swiped the Custodian’s arm away, spoiling his aim. ‘For God’s sake, let us in! We claim sanctu-ary!’ Fitz had no idea if this meant anything on this planet, but the urgency in his voice was unmistakable.

‘I’m a personal friend of Tor Grymna,’ Fitz told the guard, as clearly as he could manage. ‘On a special mission. Let us in, will you?’

The pursuing slimers had stopped at the very edge of the shantytown, where they could watch Fitz and Ckeho talking to the Custodians. The Eskoni were looking suitably nervous. It wasn’t long before the first

stone was thrown, clattering off the gates. The next one clanked against the Custodian's helmet.

'Come on,' urged Fitz, as a rain of flinty rocks descended on them. 'What are you waiting for? They'll stone us to death out here!'

'Who's he, then?' asked the second Custodian, nodding at Ckeho with a look of disgust.

'Special Agent Ckeho,' replied Fitz. 'In disguise. Check with Tor Grymna if you don't believe us, but make it quick. Tell him it's Operation Prodigal.'

The first Custodian shook his head, after ducking a viciously aimed lump of stone. 'Let them in. We'll sort this out inside!'

The gates were unlocked and opened just wide enough to let the two fugi-tives through. The guards called for reinforcements to help deal with the riot that was steadily building up outside, and in the confusion Fitz and Ckeho somehow got lost.

Revan glowered at the place where Ckeho and the Earthman had stood seconds before, almost but not quite within his grasp. Around him, slimers were hurling stones and other missiles at the hapless Eskoni Custodians on the city gate.

'We should have been ready for him,' said Manag.

Revan shrugged. 'Doesn't matter. He had no place with us. Pity about the boy, though. I wasn't finished with him.'

'Doesn't this change everything?'

'Oh, no,' Revan assured him. 'It doesn't change anything. We go on, as planned.'

The sandcars made reasonable time to the ice mine, although Compassion grumbled all the way about the delay. The Doctor suspected that she was more concerned with how much longer she would have to spend on the planet rather than any intrinsic concern over the urgency of the situation. He'd have to talk to her about that, when he had the time.

He busied himself with organising the men into the expedition proper to take his mind off her. All his instructions had to be relayed through Brevus, 122

who was nominally in charge of the Custodian contingent, then via their commander, Mekulo. Eventually they succeeded in drawing up a crew of twenty Eskoni, plus the Doctor, Compassion and Brevus, to venture into the mine itself. The five remaining Custodians were to remain in the ice-mine control centre.

In the ice mine itself, Brevus was businesslike and confident. The men seemed to pick up on this and responded well, handling the supplies with almost cheery professionalism as they descended via the main dropshaft to the first level. The Doctor was happy to leave them to it and think his own thoughts, none of which he found very reassuring. The sudden willingness of Tor Grymna to pack him off down here was worrying him. But really, there was nothing he could do about that. The caves had to be investigated. The Doctor knew there was something down here, something bad. He could feel it. He had a sense for these things, sometimes. And he simply couldn't be in two places at once. Well, not ordinarily.

Soon they were all filing through the metallic walled passages that led to the circular insertion grid room with its massive central network of tubes and rigging. Now that he had another chance to inspect the workings, the Doctor was able to glean some useful information: although the ice mine was, effectively, in a state of temporary shutdown to allow for Brevus's original preliminary investigations, there was still power running through the main steam drilling apparatus and vapourisation coils. A certain amount of water could be extracted on an automatic basis from the remains of the original ice reservoirs, and it was this water that was supplying Baktan presently.

'We had hoped to find a much larger ice field in the deeper levels,' Brevus said.

'Yes, Akestus mentioned that, too,' mused the Doctor.

'I'm not sure what we're going to find now, though.'

The Doctor clapped a hand on the Eskoni's arm. 'Cheer up. The important thing is that we are going to find *something*.'

Brevus didn't look very cheered up by that at all.

The first stage of the descent was uneventful. In fact, the men seemed to quite enjoy it – and even the Doctor found that the cool of the mine was a welcome relief from the unrelenting hotness of the surface. As they went deeper, though, it would get much colder.

It was dark down here, too: the Custodians had all been issued with elec-troluminescent lamps. They glowed with a soft amber light, casting long eerie black shadows across the roof of the cave. The rock soon began to grow crag-gier and the shadows became more jagged. Everyone began to talk less so that they could concentrate on not losing their footing.

123

‘This is where I found you,’ Brevus told the Doctor and Compassion eventually.

The Doctor shone his torch around the confines of the tunnel. The light jerked strangely around until it came to rest on Compassion’s stony features.

‘Can we expect more knivors?’ she asked.

‘I wouldn’t have thought so,’ said Brevus. ‘They’re not known for their love of light. But we must remain on our guard.’

They moved on, with Brevus and the Doctor in the lead. Mekulo followed, his face surly and locked deep in thought. His men trudged behind, with Compassion and Zela bringing up the rear.

It wasn’t long before they felt the tremor.

Everyone stopped dead as they sensed rather than felt the movement beneath their feet. There was a muted rumble, an almost subliminal grinding noise from all around them.

‘What was that?’ gasped Brevus. Even Mekulo was looking perturbed as he and his men flashed their lights around the cavern.

Compassion jogged up level with the Doctor. ‘Seismic activity,’ she said.

‘Did you feel it?’

‘We most certainly did,’ the Doctor confirmed. ‘Not good.’

‘Should we go on?’ wondered Brevus nervously.

‘We have to.’

‘Doctor,’ said Compassion, ‘I’ve been thinking. The Eskoni don’t have much in the way of wholly reliable seismic records, but the

indications are clear on the data we accessed yesterday. Any further sustained seismic motion is going to result in more powerful shockwaves. That could have a weakening effect in itself, and produce more tectonic activity than the local geological structuring can take.'

'Meaning?' asked Brevus.

'Earthquake,' said the Doctor. 'Or Eskonquake, if you want to be silly about it.'

Compassion said, 'Doctor, even a minor quake is going to be bad news for Baktan. When all's said and done it's only a big rock hollowed out. I doubt it could withstand much in the way of an actual tremor.'

'I know,' said the Doctor. 'The thought had crossed my –'

'Quiet,' interrupted Mekulo suddenly, raising a hand for silence. Everyone froze.

And then they heard it.

The rapid approach of a rushing, flapping tumult – to the Doctor and Compassion it was horribly familiar: the ferocious onrush of a cave full of knivors.

Perhaps the knivors had been resting nearby, just beyond the reach of the lamplight, or perhaps they had been disturbed by the tremor. Either way, 124

when the attack came it was vicious and sustained.

The lights flailed around the cavern as the soldiers fought to swipe at the creatures with their lamps. The flashing brilliance and madly jerking shadows drove the knivors into frenzy. The air was filled with flapping leathery wings, tiny snapping teeth and ultrasonic shrieks.

One of the things landed on the Doctor's head, its claws seizing his face and its hot, fetid breath on his cheek. With a cry of alarm he dropped his torch and tried to tear it off, but it held on fast. Its wings were getting tangled up in his hair. In a second he knew those razor-sharp teeth would sink into his flesh and tear a strip clean off the bone.

He felt a sudden thud that made his ears ring and the weight vanished.

Snapping open his eyes he saw, in the wild light, Compassion dash the beast against a nearby rock in a sharp spray of blood. Another knivor tried to attack her, but by the time it realised its mistake it too was dead, crushed in one of her hands.

Compassion could see it was going to be a bloodbath. The Eskoni were de-fenceless against a mass attack from these malignant dog-bats. There was only so much she could do on her own. The Doctor was scrabbling through his coat pockets for God knew what, more knivors flapping about his head.

The cave was a nightmare of whirling, skittering dog-bats as the men tried to fend off the impossible numbers. Mekulo succeeded in shooting one of the creatures with his handbow, but three, four, five more took its place. In a moment he was obscured from view, fighting and lashing out with hand and fist.

They were being eaten alive.

125

Chapter Eighteen

Fall Girl

‘Am I glad to see you again,’ said Fitz Kreiner truthfully.

Florence had been waiting in his room – for how long Fitz couldn’t guess, but the sight of her gave him a sudden rush of good feeling. Perhaps it was just the sight of a friendly face after his experiences in the shantytown.

He sat down gratefully in a chair and pulled off his boots. Sand poured out over the floor and sheets. He flexed his toes and winced. The slimer had really torn into that knivor bite!

Florence came over with a jug of wine and two glasses. Fitz’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. ‘I must be dreaming,’ he muttered, and she screamed and dropped the wine jug. It smashed across the floor.

Fitz twisted round to see what she was screaming at. ‘Oh, sorry, Florence.

Forgot to introduce my new pal. Say hi to Ckeho.’

Suddenly, with a mad thrashing of wings, the knivors leapt away from

the soldiers. The beasts flew up into the shadows and screeched away as if blown by the wind. They flitted and jerked and vanished into the gloom just as suddenly as they had arrived.

For a moment there was complete silence.

The Doctor was standing with his hand to his mouth, and his cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk. With a sudden gasp he pulled something silver from between his lips and laughed. 'Dog whistle!'

Brevus and Mekulo looked at him agape. Both of them had minor cuts and grazes crisscrossing their arms and faces.

'Ultrasonic frequency,' the Doctor explained happily. 'They didn't like it one bit!'

'We owe you our lives,' said Brevus wonderingly.

'Yes,' agreed Compassion, 'but he did bring you down here and put you all in danger in the first place.'

The Doctor looked stung.

Mekulo made an irritated 'tch' noise. 'We should never have come down here,' he said gruffly. 'We have no defence against creatures like that. It was a bad omen.'

127

'Scared?' queried the Doctor. The wound on his forehead where Revan's stone had hit him yesterday morning had been reopened by the knivors. In the lamplight, with a smear of blood down the side of his face and his hair hanging in a tangle over his eyes, he looked like a savage caveman.

Mekulo returned his mad stare levelly. 'No,' he said.

'Good,' responded the Doctor lightly. He brushed the hair back from his face. 'Let's get on with it, then, shall we? And no more rubbish about omens, please.'

He turned on his heel and, picking up his torch, led the way into the darkness.

Brevus watched him go and then glanced at Compassion, who was regarding the Doctor's retreating back with a sardonic smile. Behind them, Mekulo's men were already checking their equipment and

hoisting their packs, ready to continue.

It grew much colder the deeper they went. It was difficult to think that, on the surface of the planet above, the midday sun was almost capable of melting the desert sand into vast seas of glass. Their breath emerged in grey clouds turned yellow by the lamplight. The Eskoni Custodians unpacked warm clothing and wrapped up. Brevus had pulled on thick mittens and leggings, and wore a quilted poncho over his usual tunic. A length of woollen material was wrapped around his neck and chin.

Compassion was impervious to the cold and made no effort to change her outward appearance. The Doctor, although not indestructible, was more tolerant of temperature extremes than the natives and had merely donned a pair of grey woollen gloves he had found in one of his comprehensive pockets.

It was treacherously slippery, as condensed water was turned into ice underfoot. As if that weren't bad enough, the cave system itself had grown steadily more difficult to negotiate. They spent a lot of time clambering over jagged rocks and down ledges, sometimes using ropes and harnesses to lower themselves to the next level. The hard physical exertion kept them warm enough in the freezing atmosphere, but even the Doctor, who usually embraced physical challenges, found the going arduous.

They began to find large deposits of ice, frozen into strange shapes, and more and more stalactites hanging from the ceiling like translucent daggers.

The ice continually made sharp cracking noises but nothing ever seemed to move. Where the tips of the stalactites were low enough to touch, they were found to be razor sharp.

At one point they came across a vast underground chasm. The ledge they stood on was separated from another ledge on the opposite side by a vast drop, some twelve metres wide and perhaps thousands deep. Their torch

beams could not penetrate the dense blackness that stretched below them, and even a lump of ice, chipped from a stalagmite and dropped over the edge by Brevus, failed to make any discernible noise.

'What now?' asked Compassion bluntly.

'Akestus said in his report that there was a bridge of solid ice

connecting either side of the chasm,’ replied Brevus.

‘Sounds marvellous.’

Their exchange echoed clearly across the divide, rebounding seemingly for ever until it faded into the glacial darkness.

‘Maybe it’s further along,’ suggested the Doctor, clapping his gloved hands together and stamping his feet. He was evidently eager to move on. Brevus was starting to shiver as well – standing around was doing them no good at all.

‘That way,’ said Compassion, pointing to their left.

‘I’d say this way,’ retorted the Doctor, indicating the right.

‘We can’t split up,’ said Brevus emphatically. ‘We don’t have the men or the time. Which is it to be? Right or left?’

‘Left,’ Compassion assured him.

‘Let’s toss for it,’ proposed the Doctor. He pulled a coin – with some difficulty, wearing gloves – from his trouser pocket. ‘Oh. It’s a Kursaal slot-machine token. Never mind, same difference. Heads I win, tails you l-’

‘Heads left, tails right,’ interjected Compassion.

The Doctor spun the coin, fumbled the catch, and the glittering copper disc clinked off the edge of the precipice at his feet. It sparkled silently in the lamplight for a second before disappearing into the dark depths.

‘Left, I think,’ said Compassion, and turned to leave.

The Doctor shrugged and trudged after her, leaving Brevus and Mekulo to exchange worried glances.

‘So it’s like this,’ Fitz said, plucking a large, hard, round fruit from the bowl on the table. It looked a bit like an apple – greenish, with a smooth waxy skin.

‘Ckeho’s going to stay with us for a little while, that’s all. Just until he sorts things out with his dad.’

Florence looked nervously at Ckeho, clearly unwilling to peer too closely in case she saw what lay beneath the hood he had thoughtfully pulled over his head to shroud his features. Ckeho, for his part,

shuffled awkwardly in his seat.

‘Fitz, I don’t think this is a very good idea,’ the slimer said. ‘I’m intruding as it is, and if my father finds me. . . ’

Fitz waved the protestations aside with his Eskoni apple. ‘Forget it. You’ve nowhere else to go, and I won’t turn you out, kid. As for Tor Grymna, well, 129

like I said, I think *you* should go looking for *him* – not the other way round.

The way I see it, Ckeho, *he* owes *you*.’

Florence had listened attentively to Fitz’s gushing and, if truth be told, somewhat romanticised account of their escape from the shantytown. Fitz had skipped over the Squirming; he really didn’t feel up to even thinking about that again. It was enough that he and Ckeho had escaped, by the skin of their teeth, on an adrenaline high. Their subsequent disappearing act once within the city gates was a stroke of pure good fortune that Fitz assigned to his skill in eluding the authorities.

Florence had said nothing, of course, although Fitz had been puzzled by the fact that she had been able to scream when she first saw Ckeho. It wasn’t every day you found a slimy mutant in your living room, certainly, but he had thought her incapable of any vocalisation. Maybe there really was a chance of her learning to speak – given time. As he watched her gently re-dressing his leg, he thought she was the quietest and most innocent girl he had ever met.

‘I don’t want to see him again,’ Ckeho insisted.

‘You have to, mate. Don’t worry, I’ll come with you. First off we’ll find the Doctor, though, and see what he’s been up to.’ Fitz bit into the apple. ‘Trust me, I know what I’m doing.’

He was still grinning through a mouthful of apple when he looked down at his hand. Visible inside a cavity in the white flesh of the fruit was a small black worm.

The ice bridge spanned the gap between either side of the gorge, fifteen metres long and one, possibly two metres thick at its widest point. Mekulo took one look at it, considered the issue for a second, and then signalled his men to get ready to cross it.

The Doctor was pleasantly surprised: he had thought there might be a certain reluctance to traverse such an unreliable-looking path, and his estimation of the Custodians went up a notch. It was a pity they were Tor Grymna's men, that was all. That particular notion made him frown a little.

'Brevus, you and I will go first,' the Doctor told him. 'Mekulo and his men next. Compassion, you're Tail-End Charlie.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Last in line.'

'Why?'

'Because –' the Doctor dropped his voice to a murmur – 'I want to be sure all of Mekulo's lot follow us. Understand?'

Compassion nodded.

Brevus was looking anxiously at the grey-white bridge as it glistened translucently in the light of his lamp. He didn't look as though he wanted 130

to go first at all. The Doctor clapped him on the back – but not too hard –

by way of reassurance. 'Don't worry, you can follow me,' he told him. 'Don't want to let Mekulo's men think we're scared, do we?'

'Er – no.'

'That's the spirit.' The Doctor stepped forward and took a good look at the bridge. It didn't look all that wide now. Not from this angle at least. But that was probably just an optical illusion. If it was stuck to the ground he could hop across it on one foot singing a selection of melodies from *Madame Butterfly*, if he had to. Any feeling of imbalance was purely perceptual. Just walk across as if it were nothing more than a length of pavement, he told himself.

He became aware that, behind him, all of the Custodians had hoisted their packs and were waiting in line.

He looked back at the narrow bridge. It looked slippery and frail.

'Sure you don't want to go first?' he asked Brevus. 'I wouldn't want to stand in your way if, you know, you wanted to prove anything.'

‘No, Doctor,’ said Brevus firmly. ‘You first. I insist.’

Mekulo stepped forward. ‘Scared?’

The Doctor shot him a venomous look. Then, squaring his shoulders, he stepped out on to the bridge. He paused, forced himself to relax, and then, paying absolutely no attention to the blackness on either side, strolled towards the middle.

‘Come on, you lot,’ he called back over his shoulder. ‘What are you waiting for?’

They followed him in complete silence, each man concentrating entirely on his own method of crossing. Some looked straight ahead, like Mekulo, impassive and unthinking. Others proceeded with slow caution, prudently fixing their gaze on their feet. Others shuffled, nervous, wary, and mindful of the invisible drop below only a slippery footstep away.

The Doctor reached the other side of the crevasse and bounded on to the opposite ledge with a laugh of relief. He turned around and pulled Brevus after him, holding on to his forearm in a strong fireman’s grip. Brevus heaved a sigh of contentment as he stepped on to solid rock again. Even this narrow ledge was better than that treacherous length of frozen water!

Compassion walked steadily across the bridge without faltering in her stride

– until the man in front of her, the last in line of Mekulo’s men, suddenly slipped.

Perhaps the ice had been warmed sufficiently by the passage of the others to thaw, however slightly, and render the surface layer slick underfoot. Whatever it was, it was enough. One tiny skid was all it took to throw the Eskoni off 131

balance, and send him slipping wildly into the air. With a choked cry of terror he plummeted into the darkness.

Simultaneously, Compassion had lunged forward in an attempt to grab the Custodian – and had succeeded in snatching hold of the man’s backpack. The sudden change in her centre of gravity sent her sliding off the bridge as well.

There was a gasp from the men who had reached the far side and had

witnessed the fall.

‘Compassion!’ The Doctor turned his lamp towards the middle of the bridge, and the black space below it. There was no sign of either Compassion or the fallen Eskoni. His cry could be heard diminishing into the fathomless depths below, an awful wail of fear that gradually dwindled to total silence as the distance grew too great.

‘Gods!’ breathed Brevus, visibly shaken.

Mekulo’s face was a mask of grim fury in the light of his torch. His eyes were like chips of amber, blazing in the darkness. ‘That was Zela,’ he said darkly. ‘A good man, and a brave Custodian.’

The Doctor and Brevus looked back at Mekulo, their faces stricken.

Compassion twisted in the air, got a better grip of the Eskoni – she recalled that his name was Zela – and then clamped a hand over his mouth to stop the man screaming. It was difficult enough to concentrate, falling into a chasm that was so devoid of light it was impossible to achieve any kind of visual orientation.

Her inboard sensors mapped out a rough version of the crevasse’s local topography as they whirled down, spinning over and over like a pair of sycamore seeds. At their current rate of descent, Compassion calculated that they would hit the bottom in nine seconds.

More than enough time for a TARDIS.

Although she couldn’t afford to dematerialise with her randomiser still functioning, she could manoeuvre herself into a position that might cushion the impact for the Eskoni.

Six seconds.

She twisted him round, still holding his mouth with one hand, the other clamped around his chest.

Five seconds.

She wrapped her legs around his to stop them whiplashing when they hit.

Four

Turned under him, positioning herself like a shield.

Three

Angled herself so that her back and shoulders would Two

132

bear the brunt of the collision.

One.

‘Come on,’ said Fitz. ‘Let’s go.’

Ckeho had watched him kick the remains of the apple across the room, which now seemed stuffy with heat and unwelcoming. The girl – the one Fitz called Florence – sat on the bed, hugging her knees, her eyes never moving from the human. Ckeho wasn’t quite sure why she was looking at him like that; sometimes it appeared to be almost adoration, other times it looked like fear. But he could tell that Fitz didn’t want to scare her.

‘It’ll be all right,’ Fitz told her, reaching out and gently taking her hand.

‘Is it wise to bring her as well?’ asked Ckeho.

Fitz shot him an irritated look. ‘Slimers aren’t the only people being trodden on by Tor Grymna and his lot.’

‘But. . . she is just a girl.’

‘Yeah. So?’

Ckeho saw a hardness in the human’s eyes that he had never noticed before.

It had completely replaced the look of revulsion that had filled them after he had discovered the fruit parasite. Now there was something about Fitz that reminded him, oddly, of Revan. A determination to fight.

‘It’s time we were going,’ Fitz reiterated, heading for the door.

With a sense of great trepidation, Ckeho followed them.

‘Will she be all right?’ The question might seem fatuous if he had been talking about anyone but Compassion, thought Brevus.

The Doctor nodded. 'Well, yes, I should think so.'

He sounded as though he spoke with reservations, but Brevus didn't comment on it. The Doctor looked preoccupied, almost a little shocked, as if the loss of Zela were more troubling for him. Brevus noticed that the Doctor avoided Mekulo's gaze for several minutes after the accident.

Eventually, Mekulo pushed to the front. 'This way,' he said gruffly, shoulder-ing past the dazed offworlder. His men tramped after him, silent and angry.

Brevus turned to the Doctor. 'Compassion will survive a fall like that?' It seemed incredible.

The Doctor snapped himself out of his seemingly befuddled state of mind with a quick nod of the head. 'Yes. Compassion's well nigh indestructible.

Can't say the same about that poor lad, though. . . '

'It couldn't be helped,' Brevus said, speaking roughly in an effort to avoid thinking about it too much himself. 'It was a treacherous crossing. We all knew the risk. So did Zela.'

133

The Doctor took a deep breath. 'There's no point hanging around here. Let's catch up with the others.'

Emotions simmering, they turned to leave, only for the Doctor to pause and look back over his shoulder. This time, rather than looking down into the chasm, he directed his gaze upwards. The tips of huge stalactites were dimly visible, hanging in the darkness. He aimed his lamplight up into the stalactites, which glittered like giant shards of broken glass.

'What is it?' wondered Brevus, hesitating.

'Ice,' murmured the Doctor thoughtfully. 'An awful lot of it. Those stalactites are just the underside of a vast lump of frozen water slowly dripping into the chasm.'

'Ice reservoir,' said Brevus. 'It must be huge. The biggest I've ever seen.'

No wonder Akestus was so keen to come down here. That ice could provide Baktan with water for decades.'

'Possibly. Doesn't it worry you, though?'

'In what way?'

'In the way that we're standing directly under several million tons of ice, held up there simply by virtue of the fact that it is ice. Frozen solid. What if it was to start melting?'

'It can't,' Brevus said. 'It's too cold down here.'

'Then how do you explain the stalactites?' The Doctor's eyes stared at Brevus, as if he were expecting an answer. When none came, the Doctor continued: 'At zero degrees Celsius ice has a specific gravity of point one nine six eight as compared with a specific gravity point nine nine nine eight of water at the same temperature. Because water expands when it freezes, an increase of pressure tends to change ice into water and therefore lowers the melting point of the ice. It's fractional, but enough to cause icicles.'

Brevus looked back up at the frosty spikes hundreds of metres above.

'Those aren't stalactites: they're giant icicles,' said the Doctor. 'An important difference, because if that amount of ice should suddenly become too aware of the constant pull of gravity – due to a minor earth tremor, say – then we could be in real lumber.'

Brevus stared at the underside of the massive frozen lake for a second longer, before turning back to the Doctor. 'What are we waiting for? Let's get going.'

The rock passage had opened out into a large cavern vaulted with more stalactites of pure ice, some of them tapering to points that touched and merged with the tops of huge stalagmites. The surface of the bare rock around the ice was glazed with frost that sparkled in the lamplight.

134

Mekulo and his men had stumbled across a trail of sorts, albeit an invisible one. The cold air was full of a strange, noxious odour that caused the Eskoni to cover their mouths and noses with their scarves.

The Doctor stepped into the cavern and immediately wrinkled his

nose.

‘What a terrible pong,’ he announced, apparently having put the tragedy on the ice bridge right out of his mind.

‘What is it?’ asked Brevus. ‘It’s awful.’

The Doctor sniffed the air. ‘Something rotten, I’d say. You don’t empty all your refuse into the caves, do you?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Hm.’

The Doctor moved forward, slipping occasionally on the frosted ground as he clambered around the stalagmites. ‘In that case, it’s a trail.’

‘A trail?’

‘Yes,’ the Doctor called back over his shoulder, his voice echoing around the spires of ice. ‘An invisible one. It gets stronger this way.’

The Custodians filed along after them, keeping to the path made by the Doctor and Brevus. Eventually they found themselves crawling between two massive buttresses of rock covered in ice, which led into an even bigger cave.

This was massive, dwarfing the first cavern and reducing the expedition to little more than insects. The stalagmites, although huge, were no more than needles beneath the vast blackness above. No stalactites reached down from the impenetrable gloom.

The stench was appalling.

‘Where are we?’ asked Brevus, his voice tiny in the dark. Their lamp beams seemed to reach only a small way around them.

‘I don’t know,’ confessed the Doctor. He also had adopted a whisper as he moved deeper into the cavern, his torchlight seeking a path through boulders and lumps of ice.

‘This must be as far as Akestus came,’ realised Brevus. ‘Could we be near the centre of Eskon, Doctor?’

The Doctor smiled in the shadows. ‘You mean “Coldheart”, its infamous core of solid ice? No chance, Brevus. I’m afraid that’s just a

myth – Eskon couldn't possibly exist like that. As deep down as we are, we're still comparatively near the surface of the planet. I wonder what's making that terrible smell.'

'That's far enough,' said Mekulo's voice in the darkness. There was something in his tone, a flinty note of determination, that made the Doctor and Brevus stop in their tracks.

Mekulo had drawn his handbow, and loaded it. His men were doing the same. Several of the wicked-looking metal bolts were aimed at the Doctor and Brevus.

135

'Now steady on,' exclaimed the Doctor, sweeping his torch beam from Mekulo to a couple of his men and back. 'What's all this in aid of?'

'It's very simple,' said Mekulo, raising his handbow and aiming it squarely at the Doctor's chest. 'My men and I are acting under the orders of Tor Grymna.

We were to wait until you reached the farthest point of your investigation –

and then kill you.'

And, so saying, he pulled the trigger.

136

Chapter Nineteen

Fight

The moment Compassion hit the rocky floor of the chasm, Zela died. The shock of the impact broke every bone in the Eskoni's body and pulped most of his internal organs. The surrounding granite echoed with the sonorous thud of the collision, and Compassion clearly heard the man's skull crack like an egg next to her ear.

For a few seconds she suffered a minor systems disorientation as the complex biocircuitry that ran through every layer of her being settled down. Even so she was left with a misaligned internal configuration that would take some time to heal. Apart from that, there was no lasting damage.

Compassion crawled out from under Zela's slack body, not quite sure

what to think. On the face of it, the result had been eminently predictable – there was no way she could have prevented a simple animal-based life form such as his from smashing after a fall like that. But something had made her try, against all the odds, against all sense. She had wanted to at least attempt to save his life, perhaps.

But, of course, she had failed. He was dead.

At least it must have been quick – virtually instant, although the word had lost much of its original meaning to her now that she was a living TARDIS. But, again, oddly, Compassion found it eased the way in which she considered his passing.

She knelt by his body for a full minute, touching its bruised flesh with her fingers, trailing them through the sticky fluid that was running from its head, fluid that was already starting to freeze.

He was *dead*.

She'd seen death before, caused it. Taken life without thinking. Why did she feel so revolted by it now?

But this had been accident. An accident that she had tried to stop. She had *wanted* to prevent him dying.

But failed.

He was dead.

And she was. . . what? Alive? Hardly – not in the way Zela had been alive.

Not in that breathing, sleeping, eating way that she could never know again.

137

Not in the way that a fall like that could harm her.

Not in a way that she could be killed.

Or even die.

Slowly Compassion stood up. She could see easily enough even in this low level of light, well enough to tell where the Eskoni lay, crumpled and bloody, at her feet. She watched him for a few minutes more, as the coolness of the rock sapped the last moments of bodily warmth

from his flesh and left him as nothing more than meat and bone.

Then she turned and walked into the darkness.

The second Mekulo pulled the handbow's trigger, the Doctor sprang sideways out of the pool of light cast by the Custodians' torches. He was instantly swallowed by the darkness.

A moment later, Brevus felt himself yanked into the blackness too. The guards began to wave their own torches wildly around, trying to find their prey. Mekulo barked an order as Brevus was dragged to the floor. He felt the Doctor's cool hand on his face and heard him whisper, 'Stay down and keep quiet! Back in a mo.'

Wide-eyed, Brevus watched the soldiers scouring the surrounding area for the Doctor and himself. A few of the men were concentrating their lamplight on the spot where the Doctor had been standing when shot, assuming that his body must be lying there, lost in the shadows. As he watched, Brevus saw a frock-coated silhouette pass before the beams of torchlight and heard a series of hard smacks and thuds. One by one the guards doubled up or dropped to the floor, gasping and grunting under the sudden onslaught. The lamplight scattered around the stalagmites as they lost their torches.

Mekulo had reloaded his handbow, and had aligned his torch with the bolt.

As he roved the beam across the jagged rocks, he stayed in an alert crouch, ready to shoot. The bolt would, unerringly, find its mark at the centre of the torch's circle of light.

'Don't play games with me, Doctor,' Mekulo ordered. 'You're only prolonging the inevitable.'

The light caught an edge of dark velvet, and Mekulo pulled the trigger. The bolt chipped ice from a nearby stalagmite and clinked harmlessly off into the gloom. Almost simultaneously, a gloved hand leapt from the darkness and chopped down on the Eskoni's neck, stunning him. Mekulo staggered and Brevus glimpsed the Doctor's shoe as it swept the guard captain's feet from under him. Mekulo hit the floor with a bellow of rage.

'Come on!' hissed the Doctor's voice, suddenly close by. Brevus felt a strong hand pull him up by the arm and drag him further into the cavern. He stumbled and slipped after the Doctor, who seemed to be able to find his way into 138

the pitch dark. After a long, painful minute they came to a rest, breathing hard.

A flame suddenly flickered into life, illuminating the Doctor's hand and face.

Brevus recoiled in surprise.

'Don't worry,' the Doctor told him quietly. 'It's only Fitz's cigarette lighter.'

Brevus tore his gaze from the tiny flame and peered into the shadows behind them.

'We've given them the slip for the moment,' the Doctor explained hurriedly.

'But we've got to find a way out of here and quick. It won't take long for Mekulo to organise a proper hunt, once they calm down and get their bearings.'

'They've betrayed us!' gasped Brevus incredulously.

'Tor Grymna's betrayed us,' the Doctor corrected him. 'Mekulo's just following orders.'

At this moment, Brevus caught sight of something glinting in the flickering luminescence: the steel shaft of a handbow bolt protruding from the Doctor's upper arm. It had pierced the velvet sleeve of his jacket and skewered the flesh beneath.

'Didn't dodge fast enough,' murmured the Doctor, almost in apology. 'I'm slowing down in my old age.'

Brevus was aghast. 'Doesn't it hurt?'

'Yes, if I think about it. Kindly don't remind me.'

'You can't leave it there!'

'I'll have to, for the time being. We've got more important things to think about.' The Doctor was gritting his teeth now, trying to ignore the pain. 'In order to get out of this cave, we have to get past those soldiers. Any ideas?'

Once again a look of horror crossed Brevus's face. 'No!'

‘Shh. Did you hear something then?’ the Doctor held up his hand for quiet.

Dimly they could make out the sounds of Mekulo’s men organising themselves some way off, the sounds echoing around the cave.

‘They’re getting ready to come after us,’ realised Brevus worriedly.

‘No, no, no, not that.’ The Doctor waved his fingers impatiently. ‘Something else. Can you feel it?’

‘No.’

The Doctor’s voice dropped to the faintest of whispers. ‘There’s something in here with us. In the dark.’

Abruptly he switched off the cigarette lighter, and they felt a sudden gust of wind, as if something large and heavy had just silently passed by.

‘What was that?’ breathed Brevus.

‘This is where it starts getting *really* dangerous.’

Then they heard the scream.

139

* * *

The Custodians poured out of the city gates without announcement. The first wave were armed with handbows, cocked and loaded with specially barbed arrows. The rest were carrying short-bladed swords of a kind that had not seen action on Eskon for over fifty years.

It was a formidable force, but it wasn’t enough.

The slimers weren’t easily dispatched by arrow or blade. The initial attack, although catching the mutant community by surprise, became a long, drawn-out struggle against ferocious odds. Within minutes the slimers were fighting back, at first using stones and rocks hurled with furious accuracy, and then, after the first few Custodians fell, with looted swords and handbows.

By the time Revan joined the fray, the shocked city militia were fighting a rearguard action towards the gates. Reinforcements had arrived, but were grouped behind the city walls waiting for orders that

didn't come.

What began as a cull finished up as a full-scale riot. The bodies of Eskoni and slimer alike littered the sandy ground, turned muddy with blood; the mutants had nothing to lose by fighting for their lives.

The gates to Baktan lay open, surrounded by a mass of screaming, fighting individuals who in no way resembled an organised force. The Eskoni men were trying to claw and hack their way back into the city, beaten off by the savagery of their prey.

'Tor Grymna will be able to taste this blood for the rest of his miserable life,'

said Manag with grim satisfaction.

Revan nodded. 'Come with me, and we'll make sure of it.'

Before Manag could protest, Revan had slipped through the mêlée and past the gates.

The scream echoed and reverberated around the vast cavern: a long, drawn-out yell of shock and fear that ended in sudden, fatal silence.

Every single one of the Custodians stopped dead and listened, horrified.

'Come on,' said the Doctor, grabbing Brevus again and pulling him after him. Mutely, Brevus followed, his heart pounding in his chest. After only a few uneasy paces in the dark, he slipped and fell badly. For a second he thought he had found a patch of half-melted ice as his legs and hands sloshed through the slipperiness. But there was something wrong. It was thick, gelatinous.

And it smelled foul.

He reeled back reflexively, gagging, and slid a little more. The Doctor flicked the lighter back on and knelt down. Something glistened around his feet in the orange flare.

'Got you,' said a voice above them.

140

They looked up to find Mekulo standing on a ledge of ice, handbow aimed once again at the Doctor's head.

‘I won’t miss you again,’ snarled the Eskoni.

‘You didn’t miss me the first time,’ replied the Doctor, indicating the metal bolt sticking out of his left arm. ‘If it’s any consolation.’

‘What did you do to my men?’ Mekulo’s eyes were filled with a murderous fear.

‘Just a few lumps and bruises,’ answered the Doctor levelly. He remained in a crouch, twisting around to look up at the guard captain.

‘But that – that scream,’ Mekulo said, obviously shaken. The tip of the handbow bolt was trembling.

‘Nothing to do with me,’ the Doctor said hurriedly. ‘I suggest you regroup your men and withdraw as soon as poss–’

Something grey curled around Mekulo, as thick as a man’s leg, and yanked him off his feet. With a startled shout, the Eskoni was lifted high into the air, to disappear into the blackness. Moments later there was a distant shriek and then silence.

‘Oh no,’ groaned Brevus.

‘Shh!’ The Doctor clamped a hand over Brevus’s mouth. ‘Keep absolutely still.’

Something moved through the air, its motion described by a heavy whiplash noise. Another man screamed in the darkness as he was grabbed and pulled away.

‘What is it?’

‘Wait here.’ The Doctor switched off the cigarette lighter and moved away.

Lying in a crevice in a nearby rock was a discarded lamp. He switched it on and turned the beam upwards, into the impenetrable shadows above.

Something moved in the radiance – long, sinuous movement flashing through the narrow cone of light. Manoeuvring the torch jerkily to trace the movement, the Doctor picked out another of Mekulo’s men standing some twenty feet away, peering into the shadows around him. Something long and worm-like coiled around the Custodian and yanked him into the air, up and up, until the torchlight lost him.

Desperately the Doctor shone the lamp upwards, trying to locate the lost man or the tentacle. After a long moment the circle of light settled on something – the wildly kicking figure of the Custodian, shouting and screaming hoarsely, wrapped in a spaghetti tangle of pallid worms dragging him higher and higher.

Into the darkness.

A darkness that, in the light of the torch, glistened with slime.

141

Chapter Twenty

Fright

The door smashed open, scattering splinters of wood across the floor. Two or three dark, ragged figures lurched into Akestus's darkened room.

'What do you want?' asked the old Eskoni in a tremulous voice from the far corner. 'Who are you?' The nedipom on his lap had scrambled away in fear, its orange and black hide flashing across the floor.

Faster than the eye could follow, one of the intruders stamped on the little creature as it tried to escape, snapping its spine with a crunch.

'Baan!' croaked the old Eskoni in the chair, half rising. He was helped out of it by two of the ragged figures, who grabbed him and hauled him roughly to his feet.

'Hello, Akestus,' said the first man. His voice was the low, moist gnarl of a slimer. As Akestus's old eyes grew accustomed to the light spilling in from outside, he was able to discern the mucus-coated visage of the creature beneath its sacklike hood.

'Who are you?' stammered Akestus again. 'What do you want?'

'My name is Revan,' growled the slimer. 'I want your help.'

Akestus swallowed down his terror and, with as much dignity as he could muster, tried to stand up a little straighter. 'Never,' he said.

Revan looked down at the dead nedipom beneath his foot. 'Of course, you do have a choice. . . '

Akestus bit his lip, fighting down the panic that was already turning

into a nauseous acid in his gut. The sight of his faithful little pet lying still on the floor made him choke. He looked back up at Revan's featureless white eyes.

'How did you get in here?'

'How do you think?' snapped the slimer. 'I crawled up here like a worm.'

Akestus was shaking now. 'I won't help you.'

Revan stepped closer, so that the old man could see his oozing features more clearly. 'You don't have to agree to it,' he said quietly. 'I can make you.'

The Doctor's torchlight had fallen on something vast and glistening high above their heads. The circle of light picked out a mottled brownish-grey hide covered in slime. The light travelled along the hide for some length before hitting 143

a writhing nest of pale-grey tentacles at the far end.

The thing was vast. It practically formed the ceiling of the cavern, from what Brevus could see. The lamplight couldn't cover all of it, only a small patch at a time, but, as the Doctor moved the beam about, they were able to build a picture of the full, monstrous thing.

The lumpish body remained virtually still, apart from the occasional quiver of moist flesh, but the tentacles were constantly on the move, coiling and twisting, probing into the darkness below. As they watched, one of the tentacles reached down and snatched up another of Mekulo's few remaining men.

With a shrill scream he was hoisted up towards the beast, where the prehensile arm deposited the guard in a hidden maw. He disappeared with a wet crunch.

'What is it?' gasped Brevus.

'I'm not sure. I think it's a Spulver worm,' replied the Doctor. 'Flesh-eating parasite from the Aayavex system. I've never actually seen one before.' He seemed almost glad to have the chance now. His blue eyes were wide in the sulphurous lamplight as he examined what little they could see of the creature.

'This one is enormous,' he went on. 'Absolutely gigantic. It must be

the size of a whale. I've no idea how it came to be here on Eskon, but caves are its natural habitat. The Spulver worm attaches itself to the cave roof, where it hangs and waits for its prey to pass below. It hunts by temperature.'

Brevus looked up in awe. 'Temperature?'

The Doctor nodded. 'It has no eyes or ears, so it can't see or hear. It hunts by temperature alone, using a highly sensitive thermal tracking ability to locate the nearest warmest body, which it then eats. Simple and efficient, like all of nature's greatest survivors.'

'So we're likely prey too, then?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Well, my natural body heat is considerably lower than that of an Eskoni, which is why I've been safe from attack so far. It simply went for Mekulo's men first.'

'And me next, in that case,' added Brevus anxiously.

'Yes, probably,' agreed the Doctor. 'So now would be a good time to keep your cool, Brevus.'

They were crouched down in a small recess in the rock and ice. Already feeling somewhat vulnerable, Brevus found that the Doctor's assertion that the monster couldn't see or hear did nothing to persuade him to talk in anything above a sharp whisper.

'But what is it doing here?' he asked, at the same time amazed that he couldn't think of anything more cogent to say.

144

'Dying, by the look of it,' the Doctor muttered. His torch beam had found an area of the glistening hide that was obviously badly damaged. 'Probably the result of some local tectonic shift. Looks nasty.' The extent of the wound became apparent as he used the light to trace a long, wide rupture until it disappeared around the curve of the creature's bulk. The inflamed flesh around the wound trembled and convulsed as the monster continued to grope around the cave for more meat with its long, undulating tentacles.

'Doctor,' murmured Brevus with a hot flush of renewed fear, 'if that thing hunts by body heat, how long will it be before it finds us? If it's so sensitive to temperature, even you must stand out like a beacon against this freezing rock and ice.'

‘True,’ conceded the Doctor. ‘I can only assume that the Spulver worm has been incapacitated by its wound. It is severely injured. Look.’

The torchlight was turned back on to the lesion. A thick yellow-grey discharge filled the ragged laceration, bubbling like soup as noxious gases built up beneath the flesh.

‘The wound is badly infected,’ noted the Doctor. ‘It’s turned completely septic, which explains the horrible smell. Even so, it may not be long before it does detect us, so I recommend a hasty retreat.’

Thankfully, Brevus began to move, only to feel the Doctor’s hand grip his arm once more.

‘Wait wait wait,’ he said urgently. ‘Look down here.’ He had turned the lamplight down towards their feet, which were still submerged in a slime that had caused Brevus to slip and fall in the first place. The Doctor knelt down closer to the ooze and pulled a face. ‘Pus,’ he announced. ‘Leaking from the wound. It’s pooling up all around here.’

‘Oh no,’ groaned Brevus sickly.

The Doctor fumbled in a pocket and produced a pencil, which he proceeded to dip into the yellow liquid. He then removed the stopper from a tiny glass phial of water and tipped the contents out. Brevus recognised it with remarkable clarity as the same phial the Doctor had used in his conjuring trick on the sandcar the previous day. He watched the Doctor smear the ichor on the tip of his pencil around the inside of the tube, grimacing as he did so. ‘Just a little sample,’ he told Brevus, ‘for analysis. Might confirm a theory.’

‘Doctor,’ said Brevus, trying not to balk, ‘the only theory I want confirming now is the one concerning our exit.’

The Doctor risked a grin. ‘I’m right behind you.’

‘Unbelievable,’ hissed Tor Grymna, screwing up the paper and hurling it at the messenger. Instinctively the messenger ducked, and the ball of paper sailed over his head.

145

‘Don’t tell me,’ murmured Anavolus from the windowsill. ‘Trouble.’

Tor Grymna marched around the room like an angel of fury. ‘This time they have gone too far,’ he snarled. ‘They shall all be executed, every

last one!’

‘That was the general idea this time,’ remarked Anavolus. Was that the hint of a tired, almost ironical smile on his lips? He turned from the window and regarded his colleague. ‘I knew it wouldn’t work.’

‘You admitted yourself that it was our only option, Anavolus.’

‘True. But I had envisaged that the operation would be difficult.’

‘We can still succeed,’ insisted Tor Grymna. ‘The slimers have nowhere else to go but the desert. If we don’t destroy them here, then we can drive them out into the baking wilderness to burn.’

It was at this point that the messenger spoke up. ‘It might be more difficult than that, My Lord,’ he stammered. Both Anavolus and Tor Grymna turned to stare at him. Licking the driest of lips, the messenger continued: ‘When the city Custodians had regrouped and shut the gates, My Lord, they discovered that a number of slimers had gained entry to the city itself.’

Tor Grymna’s eyes glowed blackly. ‘Slimers – in Baktan?’

‘Yes, My Lord. A few of them slipped through in the confusion, apparently.’

Both Tor Grymna and Anavolus looked thunderstruck. ‘Slipped through?’

repeated Anavolus stupidly.

Tor Grymna switched his glare from the messenger to his colleague. ‘Ckeho?’ Anavolus breathed.

‘Or Revan,’ muttered Tor Grymna. Without another word he turned and swept out of the Forum chamber.

Tor Grymna’s apartment was pretty much as Fitz remembered it – spartan, unlivd in, with one locked door leading off to the squalid little room where Ckeho had been held prisoner. Fitz wondered how long that had actually been

– how long since the mutation had happened.

Ckeho stood in the middle of his old room, a pathetic figure in an old grey cloak taken from his father’s wardrobe. God knows what he must be thinking now, thought Fitz. Probably wondering what the hell he’s

doing back here.

And, for that matter, what the hell am *I* doing back here?

Fitz's passionate belief in confronting Tor Grymna had evaporated somewhat on the way here. But, when Fitz had hesitated on the threshold of Tor Grymna's place and opened his mouth to urge Ckeho to think twice, Florence had walked boldly on. Fitz had bitten back his trepidation, squared his shoulders like an idiot and marched straight in after the girl.

Now they were all waiting for Tor Grymna to arrive. And when he did, Fitz assumed he'd do the proper thing and have them arrested, killed on the spot or publicly horsewhipped. Or all three, perhaps.

146

There was only one thing to do now, if retreat was not an option. Bluff it out.

One sight of that miserable specimen in his ragged cloak was enough, however, to convince Fitz that they had a case.

Before he could think about it much longer, the inevitable happened.

Tor Grymna stepped through the door and looked straight at Fitz with eyes that could fry bacon at twenty paces.

Ckeho stepped out of the room, and his father turned to look at him.

'You,' Tor Grymna spat.

Fitz couldn't be certain, but he thought he detected the tiniest note of relief in that rumbling voice. 'You were expecting someone else?' he enquired.

Tor Grymna spared him a glance that would not only fry bacon, but also fold it up in a sandwich and eat it in one bite.

'So,' the old Eskoni said levelly, turning back to Ckeho. 'You return. I knew that you would.'

Ckeho stared at his father but said nothing.

'You don't belong out there with that scum,' Tor Grymna continued.

'You believe that I belong here?'

Tor Grymna snorted. 'As much as you can belong anywhere. This is. . . was your home.'

'My prison.'

'Ah. I expect you were free in the shantytown, were you? Free to live life to the full, fall in love, work hard in the service of your community.' Tor Grymna's voice hardened into words of pure granite. 'Have children?'

Ckeho just shook his head.

This wasn't at all the way Fitz had planned it. Not that he had actually planned it in the 'plan' sense of the word. 'Foreseen' might have been a better word. Or 'hoped for'. 'Listen,' he began, 'I know you two haven't always seen eye to eye, but –'

'What are you doing here?' asked Tor Grymna. 'This has nothing to do with you – or your friends. And what are you doing with that – that *thing* in here?'

With a start Fitz realised he was referring to Florence. 'Right, that does it.

I'm flaming well sick of you lot. Can't you see she's not just a nameless thing?

She's a person, you moron.'

'Do shut up!' Tor Grymna backhanded Fitz so hard that he spun nearly 180

degrees and collapsed on the floor, his lip split in half. Hot blood slipped into his mouth.

Ckeho surged forward, grabbing at his father's arm while Florence knelt with a pitiful wail by Fitz. Tor Grymna pushed his son back, hard enough to throw him against the wall with a moist slap.

147

'This is why I avoid confrontation,' mumbled Fitz thickly to Florence as she helped him to stand up. He didn't really want to stand up – it could only give Tor Grymna another chance to knock him down. But if it meant he was a step closer to leaving, then so be it.

Tor Grymna was breathing harshly as he watched Fitz dabbing at his

lip with his fingers and examining the result.

‘You and her kind should always be kept in their place,’ Tor Grymna said.

‘And the slimers too. It is the only way to maintain order, to maintain the history.’

‘Uh huh,’ agreed Fitz. ‘That’s if it’s a history worth maintaining. I don’t think it is, personally. In the normal way of things, the Doctor would’ve had something to say about the way you lot run things around here. But as it is, you’re lucky he’s been distracted by something he thinks is more important –

like saving all your miserable skins, probably. I don’t think he should bother, myself. As far as I’m concerned, you can all bloody well starve to death, dry up and blow away or mutate into who cares what. To hell with the lot of you.’

He staggered out of the room clutching his mouth, dizzy and half supported by Florence. In the corridor outside he shrugged off her hand and walked away.

Tor Grymna turned back to face Ckeho.

‘So much for your so-called friend,’ he said. ‘Now, we can talk properly.’

‘We have *never* talked properly!’

‘You have never been a proper son!’

‘I was, once.’

Tor Grymna opened his mouth to snarl a reply, and then closed it again.

‘You were, once. Yes. I remember the son I had then – he was young and full of life. He never stopped moving and asking questions and looking up to me and wanting to be like me. You were always copying everything I did.

Everything. The way I dressed, the words I used. . . What happened to him?’

‘I’m here.’

‘No, no, that’s not true. You are *not* Ckeho. Not my Ckeho.’ Tor Grymna raised a thick finger and pointed it unwaveringly at the slimer. ‘You could have followed in my footsteps – joined the Forum. Kept my family in a position of power and importance for ever. Instead of that you ruined everything.

Everything. I lost my wife, my family and my future because of you. You are not my son. You’re some misbegotten throwback, sent to punish me for things I should never have done.’

Ckeho moved forward and grasped his father’s arm. ‘How can you be so blind?’

Tor Grymna tore himself free of the grip. ‘Don’t touch me!’

148

‘Why? It’s me. Ckeho. Your son.’

Tor Grymna glared at the slimer before lunging forward and yanking Ckeho’s hood back from his head. The drooling grey features stared back at the old Eskoni with fear and shame in the pallid white eyes.

‘You’re not Ckeho,’ hissed Tor Grymna, shaking with emotion. His voice dropped to an anguished whisper: ‘Ckeho had clear, soft skin. It had the scent of his mother. And fur like anhröha down.’

‘All that is gone, Father. When I became like this I needed you. You loved me and protected me and promised me the world. You lost your family but what about me? I lost a family too, and a father. What have I left now? Look at me!’ Ckeho’s mouth had opened in a rictus of anguish, strings of mucus hanging from the lipless orifice.

Teeth bared in anger, Tor Grymna raised his hand and struck Ckeho down with a bellow of rage.

The sandcar pulled out of the garages and made for the desert, its skin and wheels cracking and clicking as the heat of the sun fell on its previously cooled surface.

At the front of the car stood Revan, his torn garments fluttering in the breeze of the vehicle’s motion. Next to him was Manag, and before them knelt the wiry old body of Akestus.

‘You might think you’ve served your purpose in life, old man,’ cried Revan.

‘But you’ve not served mine.’

‘What is it you want?’ Akestus demanded in a broken voice.

‘The ice mine!’

149

Chapter Twenty-One

Better Out Than In

The five Custodians left in the ice mine by Mekulo were, to say the least, bored. That made them irritable and restless. Tired of playing toss-bone games in the main control chamber, two of the Custodians decided to check on the sandcars, which had been left in the lee of the mine’s long shadow to cool. It was something to do, after all. And then, when they returned from the baking heat outside, they might feel the benefit of the mine’s cooler interior.

‘This is a waste of time,’ commented Isco miserably as they tramped out of the entry passage. It felt like walking into naked flame when they reached the sun-bright terrace of the concrete apron that encircled the mine.

‘Complete and utter waste of time,’ agreed his partner, Lifax. ‘We should be back in Baktan, dealing with the slimers. Rumour had it Tor Grymna was planning to waste the lot of them.’

‘Is that true?’ asked Isco incredulously.

Lifax shrugged. ‘Not for me to say, but it makes sense, doesn’t it? They can’t be allowed to carry on the way they are. They’re an eyesore, for a start. Dirty.

Criminals, the lot of them. I say wipe them out and be done with it.’

‘Didn’t one of your cousins turn into a slimer?’

Lifax shifted awkwardly. ‘No! That was the cousin of my sister-in-law. Never saw him in my life. They say the house stank for weeks afterwards. His mother was never the same.’

Both Lifax and Isco never expected to meet a slimer out here, miles from the shantytown surrounding Baktan. Still less did they expect to meet a group of them, all carrying staves and short swords.

Before either of the Eskoni Custodians could react, Revan's blade buried itself in the chest of one of them. Manag's sword bit into the other's head a moment later.

The guards slumped to the concrete without another sound. Revan put his foot on his victim's still chest and pulled his sword free with a tiny sucking noise.

'It starts,' he said quietly.

151

'You murdering swine,' said Akestus, struggling against the powerful grip of another slimer.

'Be quiet,' ordered Manag fiercely.

'Relax, Akestus,' added Revan. 'You'll be joining them soon enough – when you've done what I've brought you here for.'

'Never!' spat Akestus, only to receive a punch behind the ear from Manag.

Revan couldn't smile, exactly, but the lipless hole in his glistening face pulled back from the sharp grey teeth in rough approximation.

Deep below the ice mine, at the bottom of the labyrinth of caves and tunnels formed by the aeons-old juxtaposition of rock and ice, the only survivors of the Doctor's expedition – himself and Brevus – were traversing the ice bridge.

Not one of Mekulo's men had survived the encounter with the Spulver worm.

Every one had been plucked from the floor of the cavern by the vast beast's sinuous tentacles and thrust into whatever unthinkable orifice it used as a mouth.

'But what's it been living on?' asked Brevus as he completed the final few metres across the bridge and flung himself on to the opposite ledge. The Doctor caught him and they sank back against the wall of the cliff, their rasping breath forming clouds of steam in the freezing air. 'I mean. . . it's eaten all those men now, but before that. . . what?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Graco?'

Brevus looked pained. 'You heard him scream.'

‘It must have been him. The strange acoustics of this cave system could have transported any noise loud enough right up to the knivor tunnels. Of course!’ the Doctor slapped himself on the side of the head. The knivors. It’s possible the Spulver worm’s been living off those for years.’

‘Years?’

‘Decades even,’ enthused the Doctor. ‘You have to understand: the Spulver worm is an incredibly hardy creature. It evolved on the third moon of Aayavex after its indigenous civilisation wiped itself out in a global genetics war. The leftover technology genetically mutated everything else left alive on the planetoid until it became a savage, unnatural free-for-all. Against all the odds, the Spulver worm outsurvived the competition, mostly by virtue of being so amazingly tough. It can live for decades without eating, grows at a phenomenal rate, and can survive terrible wounds – just like this one has.’

Brevus was ready to agree to that. ‘It didn’t show any signs of distress.’

‘Not outwardly,’ admitted the Doctor. ‘But it’s entirely possible that it’s been oozing pus for years now – a horrendously toxic discharge that has slowly been absorbed by the surrounding ice field.’

152

Brevus saw the conclusion coming. ‘And that’s what you think has infected our water supply?’

‘Very much so. Because if I’m right, the Spulver worm’s powerfully mutational DNA will be present even in the pus, and, once transferred into an alien biological system. . . ’ The Doctor made a face. ‘Well, let’s just say it wouldn’t take much for that old thing’s rough-and-ready DNA to overwrite the delicate genetic template of the local population.’

‘The slimers,’ realised Brevus grimly.

‘We’ll know more when we get back to Baktan and analyse this sample,’ said the Doctor, tapping the pocket in which he had stored the test tube. ‘That’s if *aaaarrgh!* ’

Suddenly he fell back as if struck, clutching his upper left arm. His face was screwed up in agony. He sank back against the rock wall and slid painfully down into a sitting position. Brevus knelt down beside

him, and with a jolt saw that Mekulo's handbow bolt was still sticking out of the Doctor's arm. In the light of his lamp, Brevus could see that the velvet of the Doctor's sleeve was dark with blood, and the hand that emerged from its cuff was slippery with it.

The Doctor was breathing hoarsely. 'Delayed reaction. . . Held it off for as long as I could. . . Bound to catch up with me. . . sooner or later.'

'You mean you'd forgotten to react to the bolt hitting you back in the cave?'

Brevus sounded incredulous.

The Doctor smiled weakly. 'Not. . . forgotten. Just left it until now. Mind-over-matter stuff. Boring. . . but. . . sometimes useful.'

'So what do we do now?'

The Doctor licked his lips. The bolt's got to. . . come out.'

'But, Doctor, Mekulo's men used barbed arrowheads. . . '

'I know. Just means it's got to come out. . . the other side, that's all. Stop the barbs ripping the flesh any more than they have to. It's practically all the way through anyway.' The Doctor glanced up at Brevus, a wealth of pain in the scrunched-up blue eyes. 'Ready?' he enquired as he reached up and placed the flat of one hand over the end of the steel spike jutting from his arm.

'No!' cried Brevus instinctively.

'Too late!' yelled the Doctor, pushing down on the bolt with sudden force.

The sharp tip tore out through the material of his shirtsleeve and jacket and glinted red in the lamplight. The Doctor let out a gasp with teeth tightly clenched. 'Not. . . done. . . yet,' he hissed, reaching around the back of his arm and grasping the barbed tip that now protruded.

Brevus watched with a mixture of pure horror and immense admiration as the Doctor gradually pulled the length of steel through his arm, centimetre by centimetre. He saw the back end of the bolt disappear into the blood-soaked

velvet, and, seconds later, the Doctor pulled the thing completely free with a sharp cry of pain. He collapsed against Brevus, the knuckles of his hand white beneath the blood.

‘Better out than in,’ he mumbled.

Compassion was lost.

She had decided to follow a roughly ascending route where possible, physically climbing up the rough stone surfaces of the chasm when she could, leaping on to higher ledges where possible. Somewhere, somehow, she must reach the surface that way. If she met an impenetrable overhang, then she worked around it, or over it, or moved sideways until she found a slightly easier route.

Nothing could stop her.

Nothing at all.

Her fingers bit like chisels into the rock, gouging out fragments of silica and flint as she laboriously pulled herself upwards. Eventually she reached a plateau of ice, which was easier going. By heating up her hands she could crunch them right into the frozen water and haul herself up at a faster rate.

She got quite a rhythm going at one point, and, at last, emerged on to the top of what she guessed was one of Eskon’s massive subterranean ice lakes.

She sat still for a minute – not to recover her strength or get her breath back, nothing so human. She just stopped.

Although her internal architecture was still shaken up from the fall, the physical effort of the climb back up had been minimal. Her mind, however, was a rage of confusion. Why had she tried to save Zela? What had been the point? That fall was going to be fatal, whatever she’d done. Not long ago, Compassion wouldn’t have even bothered to try, let alone have wasted any thought on it.

Don’t tell me the Doctor’s rubbing off on me, she thought. It was already working with Fitz – she’d seen the changes in him. They were slight, and prone to crumble at the first sign of difficulty, but he was no longer the completely self-obsessed little runt he’d been when she first met him. He’d been changed at the hands of the Remote, and then the TARDIS, of course, when Compassion had first joined the Doctor, but the recent changes were more insidious and personal. He

was prepared to at least admit to what he believed in, if not stand up for it. Fitz would have tried to save Zela, without thinking about it.

Something buzzed at the back of Compassion's mind as she thought it over, and then, of course, the one word that finally surfaced was the most obvious: TARDIS.

She'd been tuned in to the Doctor's old Type 40 capsule. That's what had, 154

eventually, helped turn her into what she was today. She had been dimensionally reformatted on its basic mathematical-temporal premise. But that clapped-out old antique of a TARDIS, with its ludicrous disguise as a battered blue police box, had been a part of the Doctor as well. Over the centuries he must have become attuned to his TARDIS's telepathic senses. Doubtless the thing had fed off him, lived with him, read his mind, thought his thoughts.

And passed them on, by default, to Compassion.

Once she had lived only by receiving signals and information through a specially designed earpiece. The signals had told her what to think and how to behave. She'd never really questioned it. That was what had made her so. . . receptive to the Doctor's TARDIS.

But now she found the notion of reacting and thinking based on someone else's reactions and thoughts to be appalling.

Anathema.

As she thought that word, she caught sight – her eyes automatically attuned to infrared vision at the moment – of something in the ice. It was buried deep inside. Forgetting her worries for the moment, she stood up and hacked out a section of the hardened water with her bare hands, digging down through it for a good five metres until her hand struck metal.

A moment's analysis told her it was duralinium-based alloy.

Spaceship hull metal.

The fire spread through the shantytown like an infection. The sun-dried materials of the tents and walkways ignited easily and were engulfed by the flame.

The slimers ran and fought to escape the inferno, but most were

caught within the ring of fire laid down by the Custodians. When they burned, the slimers screamed and howled and writhed in the dirt. The Custodians watched them die, holding their hands over their mouths and noses to ward off the terrible frying stench.

Those with the stomach to watch closely saw strange things moving in the flames, twisting like snakes as they rose from the charred remains of the slimers. They hissed and bubbled, falling out on to the blackened sand in heaps of wriggling fire.

Some managed to squirm free of the heat, but they couldn't move far. They curled around each other in pain-racked madness until they lay still and smoking.

Fitz looked down through the window. He could just see the edge of the slimer shanties, but he couldn't hear anything. He was too far up, which, in the circumstances, was exactly the best place to be. He'd witnessed the 155

Custodians setting fire to the shantytown, and the sight made him gag with revulsion.

He turned from the window and found Florence at his side again. She hadn't let him out of sight since he'd flounced out of Tor Grymna's apartment, as if she was scared of losing him.

'They're murdering those people,' he said to her. Of course she made no reply. Fitz wanted to say more, but suddenly found the nickname he'd given her sounded ridiculous in the circumstances. 'Florence, are you absolutely sure you haven't got a name?'

She looked up at him and smiled.

'I mean, I can't keep calling you Florence, can I?' Fitz floundered for a moment before hitting on an idea. 'Look: I'm Fitz, right. Fitz. Try saying it. Fitz.

Fitz.'

She looked blankly at him.

'Fitz,' said Fitz.

Her lips parted, just slightly. Then she slowly tucked her lower lip behind her upper teeth. It took Fitz a moment to realise that she was forming the letter F.

‘It’s all over Baktan,’ said a voice behind them, so close it made them jump.

Fitz twisted around to see a tall Eskoni merchant peering eagerly out of the window, just as Fitz had done minutes earlier. ‘The riot,’ he said. ‘Everyone’s talking about it. Do you know what happened?’

Fitz said that they did.

The Eskoni merchant gazed suspiciously at Florence before saying, regardless of Fitz’s reply, ‘Let me tell you this, then: Tor Grymna’s men have rased the slimer town to the ground. The slimers had tried to rise up against them.

They say they stuck the severed heads of the Custodians on poles and propped them up against the gates. Barbarian mutants!’

‘Yeah,’ muttered Fitz. ‘Terrible. Fancy fighting for their lives like that. You’d think they’d have the decency to lie down and be slaughtered, wouldn’t you?’

The merchant recoiled visibly. ‘Whatever do you mean? Is that supposed to be a joke? I’d heard that aliens could be strange, but –’

‘It’s called sarcasm,’ Fitz said. ‘Alien sarcasm. I’m trying to tell you that I think you’re a fascist prig and your opinions stink. Get lost.’

The merchant lurched back as if struck and bolted for the safety of the market.

‘Hell,’ spat Fitz miserably. ‘He’s probably the brother of the last king of Baktan or something, and I’ll have caused another intergalactic incident.’

It was a fairly arduous route back up to the upper caves, many of which had been formed by the original ice seams being mined dry. Brevus kept the Doctor 156

informed about the formation of the tunnel system, but the Doctor’s mind seemed to be elsewhere. Eventually they reached the knivor caves, which meant that they were near to the actual mine workings proper. The Doctor kept his dog whistle clamped between his teeth the whole way, giving off blasts of ultrasonic sound at regular intervals to ward off the bats. Happily, it seemed to work, and they didn’t see a single knivor.

Brevus's spirits actually began to rise a little as they reached the bottom of the initial shaft and rode the elevator to the insertion grids and the primary steam-drill chamber. It felt good to be so far from the Spulver worm and the terrible fight in the cavern. It also felt considerably warmer up here and he was able to get rid of his thick poncho and climbing gear. Apart from his bandaged arm and a few cuts and bruises around the face, the Doctor looked none the worse for wear – but for a slightly faraway look on his long face.

‘What are you thinking about?’ Brevus asked as the elevator deposited them at ground level. They walked gratefully through the annexe room and approached the double doors that led to the control chamber proper.

The Doctor pulled a face. ‘Well, now that we’ve found the Spulver worm,’

he said, ‘I’m trying to think of the best way to get rid of it. It won’t be easy.’

‘You’re absolutely right about that, Doctor,’ said Brevus, stopping in his tracks.

The Doctor looked up, alerted by the cautionary tone in the Eskoni’s voice.

Brevus was standing stock-still and looking at the entrance to the control chamber, his expression a mixture of astonishment and fear.

Standing in the doorway was a slimer. The Doctor recognised him instantly.

‘Revan!’

‘We meet again, Doctor.’ Revan gestured to two more slimers who were positioned on either side of the Doctor and Brevus. They were armed with Eskoni handbows. ‘Kill them,’ he said.

157

Chapter Twenty-Two

Hijack

‘Oh, this is all we need,’ exclaimed the Doctor irritably. ‘Revan, haven’t you got anything better to do?’

Revan lashed out and knocked him down.

The Doctor sprawled across the floor, dazed. Brevus started forward and tried to help him up, only to receive a sudden blow to the head from one of the other slimers. Brevus sank to his knees with a grunt of pain.

‘There’s no need for that,’ snapped the Doctor, getting to his feet. He glared at the slimer. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Manag,’ snarled the mutant.

‘Well, Manag, a word of advice: let that be your last act of violence here today.’ The Doctor’s eyes burned like blue flame. ‘Or I’ll see that you regret it.

Personally.’

‘Threats don’t suit you, Doctor,’ said Revan. ‘You’re too soft.’ He poked Brevus with his foot. ‘Get up.’

‘Are you all right?’ asked the Doctor as the Eskoni stood up.

He nodded, rubbing the back of his head and wincing. ‘What’s going on here?’

Revan replied. ‘The ice mine is now under my control. Within the hour I expect to force the Forum of Baktan into acceding to each and every one of my demands.’

Ckeho watched the knife closely. Its long curving blade glinted in the light from the window. It was an ordinary kitchen utensil, in a very ordinary setting.

But the circumstances were all wrong. It was held in the giant fist of an enraged man intent, it seemed, on plunging the knife deep into his own son’s heart.

If I still have such a thing as a heart, reflected Ckeho. And not some twisting, wormlike thing coiled in my chest.

Tor Grymna’s eyes were like little black chips of slate, both reflecting the glittering blade before them as a tiny sliver of metal. He’d stood like this once before, ready to dispatch his own son, his own flesh and blood.

With the same knife.

Ckeho looked up at his father, petrified.

‘Do you really think’, Tor Grymna growled in a voice like stone, ‘that I could ever use this on you?’

Tor Grymna turned and hurled the knife away with animal ferocity. Ckeho flinched as he heard the metal clatter around the room.

‘I couldn’t do it then, and I cannot do it now,’ Tor Grymna whispered. ‘Whatever thing you have become, whatever it is you are now – you were, once, my Ckeho.’

The slimer watched as Tor Grymna threw back his head to prevent the tears falling. ‘Father –’

‘Get out.’

‘But. . .’

‘Get out. Please. Just go.’

Ckeho stood up slowly, and, never taking his eyes off the strangely cowed figure in his Forum robes, quietly left.

Tor Grymna let out a single, angry snarl and then straightened, summoning every last bit of dignity still allowed to him. Long after Ckeho had left, he said again, ‘Just go.’

Ckeho staggered down the wide passage that led from his father’s home. He was more confused than ever, now. He rounded a corner and came face to face with a group of Eskoni dignitaries, civic leaders in their own right, on their way to a meeting of some kind. Several were still muttering about a slimer riot and the tragic loss of Eskoni lives.

Then they saw Ckeho.

His hood was back from his face, exposing the patchy grey-black flesh and its thick coating of jelly-like mucus. His circular mouth puckered open in surprise and fear.

‘By Dallufvir,’ swore one of the Eskoni, recoiling. ‘One of the swine has got up here!’

‘Get him!’ cried another.

‘No, don’t touch it,’ said a third.

‘Call the Custodians!’

‘Kill it!’

Ckeho turned and ran. He headed straight back the way he had come, instinctively returning to the only place he had ever called home.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said the Doctor crossly. ‘There simply isn’t time for any of this, Revan. Let me pass, please. We need to return to Baktan as soon as possible.’

160

The Doctor started to push past the slimer, only to find a steely hand around his arm – right over the wound left by Mekulo’s handbow bolt. The Doctor gave an incoherent growl of agony as Revan increased the pressure and drove the Time Lord to his knees once more. ‘I said, I am in control here,’ the mutant reiterated, before twisting the Doctor’s arm again and hurling him across the floor of the control room. The Doctor skidded across the polished metal and clanged painfully up against a computer bank.

‘Revan!’ he shouted, scrambling to his feet. ‘Listen to me!’

‘No, you listen to me.’ Revan took one of his follower’s handbows and aimed it at the Doctor’s head. The next word you speak will be your last, Doctor. That is my final warning.’

The Doctor’s mouth opened and then abruptly shut in an annoyed pout.

‘That’s better,’ said Revan. ‘I have control of this ice mine. I therefore control the water supply to all of Baktan. How long do you think Anavolus and his people will last without water? How many mouths will run dry before he and his precious Forum are forced into obeying me?’

‘Revan,’ said Brevus quietly, careful to keep his hands in the air and appear nonthreatening. ‘What’s happened to the Custodians we left guarding this room?’

‘They’re all dead,’ replied Manag. ‘We’ve left their bodies outside to dry.’

Brevus's face twisted. 'You murdering filth.'

Revan ignored the insult, and turned back to the Doctor. 'Well?'

The Doctor began to use his hands and fingers to sign his reply.

'You can speak – for now.'

'Thank you.' The Doctor almost gasped with relief, as if not talking had been as difficult as holding his breath. 'I've already been shot once today –

twice would be just too much.'

'Don't tempt me.'

'Listen to me! I understand why you feel you've got to do this.' The Doctor spoke with studied urgency. 'But, believe me, there's a lot more at stake here than you know. A very large alien parasite called a Spulver worm has been contaminating the water supply from this ice mine for years with toxic pathogens. These pathogens have integrated with the Eskoni genetic code and completely overwritten the original biological data, triggering massive degenerate mutation.'

'What are you trying to tell me, Doctor?'

The Doctor took a deep breath. This was the crunch. 'I'm afraid it is this contamination that has caused the slimers to evolve. A hybrid species.'

There was an ominous silence.

Brevus licked his dry lips. 'Half Eskoni, half Spulver worm.'

161

The Doctor winced. 'It's actually a bit more complicated than that, but that is the gist of it.'

'I don't believe you,' said Revan simply.

'I didn't think you would,' complained the Doctor. 'Which part didn't you understand? I did try to keep it nontechnical. I can go into the biogenetics side a bit more if you like.'

'It's too convenient. You're just trying to stop me from gaining control of the Forum.'

‘You’re right, I am. Because that is possibly the most stupid thing you could do right now. I have to get to Baktan and speak to Anavolus, explain the problem, and try to come up with a way of dealing with it.’ The Doctor fixed Revan with his most steely glare. ‘There simply isn’t time for me to have to stop an attempted revolution as well.’

Revan snorted. ‘Revolution? You’re talking politics, Doctor. This is about survival, and retribution.’

‘Revan!’ the Doctor exploded with exasperation. ‘This isn’t anything to do with politics or retribution or even water supplies. It’s all about a monster! A whopping great big alien monster living underground and slowly wiping out the Eskoni people.’

‘Then we have the same aims, this monster and I.’

‘As well as the same genes.’

Revan’s hand clamped over the Doctor’s mouth in a sudden flash of motion.

The slimer’s thick, stubby fingers dug into the flesh of the Doctor’s face, and he could feel the cold wetness of the mucus coating on his skin. ‘I could crush your skull with one hand,’ the slimer hissed. ‘Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t do exactly that, right now.’

‘Mmmphh,’ said the Doctor. ‘Mmph mmp mmphh.’

Revan relaxed his grip slightly. The Doctor said, with only a slight increase in clarity, ‘I’m the only person on the planet who can possibly save you, regardless of what you think. Let me deal with the Spulver worm, and I promise I will then deal with the Forum on your behalf.’

‘You’d say anything to save your own neck,’ stated Revan.

‘So stop threatening me – and see what I say then.’

Revan considered for a moment, and then said, ‘My people have already set the thermium explosives within the mine system. At my command, the water pumps will be completely destroyed.’ Revan released the Doctor’s face and laughed gutturally. ‘So you see, you’re just too late, Doctor.’

Compassion sat up against a huge block of solid ice hewn from the glacier and examined the data core in her hands. She’d torn it free of the spaceship’s 162

central computer deck without too much trouble, and a few minutes' examination showed it to be of simplistic design. It was roughly cylindrical, with a middle section constructed of a lattice of memory crystals. By altering her basic form into a suitable data-extraction module, she was able to scan the ship's log in a couple of seconds.

It seemed that it had been a deep-space cargo freighter registered in the Aayavex system, which would place it a long way from home if the Doctor's estimate of Eskon's whereabouts was correct. The ship's computer had logged a billion-to-one error in the photon manifold of the vessel's antiquated supra-light drive, which was probably responsible for its eventual crash-landing here on Eskon. The ship's life-support system had gone off line at the moment of impact and the crew perished. Although the memory core had remained in-tact, all other computer systems had also failed, including any kind of calendar or time-keeping program. It was impossible to say how long ago the crash had taken place. Long ago enough, Compassion thought, for the thing to be encased in an iceberg and buried under a couple of clicks of rock.

It was interesting, she supposed, but meant nothing to her. The Doctor would have probably been very excited by the find, but all Compassion was interested in was finding her way back to the surface. She tossed the component aside and resumed her ascent of the ice face.

'Akestus!' exclaimed Brevus. 'What are you doing here?'

The old Eskoni looked up as Brevus and the Doctor were pushed into the control-room annexe. Akestus was sitting on the floor, his face a mass of bruises. The Doctor immediately knelt down and examined him.

'You'll have a lovely shiner in the morning, Akestus,' he said, 'but otherwise you're OK. Revan and his chums have been getting a little carried away, haven't they?'

'I will kill him,' said Akestus simply. His voice sounded weak, and his hands were trembling. The Doctor squeezed his shoulder reassuringly.

'What's he done to you?' asked Brevus.

'He has forced me to show him the operational mechanisms of the mine and the location of the main water pumps.'

'Which is where he chose to place his explosive charges,' noted the

Doctor.

‘He’s planning on forcing the Forum to give in to his demands – do as he says or he cuts off the water.’

‘No.’ Akestus shook his head. ‘That’s not it. He’s not going to blackmail the Forum, Doctor. He wants to destroy them – and Baktan. He’s going to blow the water pumps up anyway.’

The Doctor was horrified. ‘What?’

163

‘He’s placed more thermium devices along the pipelines leading out of the mine, deep underground,’ Akestus continued. ‘And there are others in the generator room and drill-head chamber. I’m sorry, I couldn’t stop him. . . ’

‘It’s all right,’ said the Doctor, without much conviction. ‘We’ll sort it out.’

Akestus shook his head again. ‘It’s too late, Doctor. Too late.’

‘It’s never too late for me.’ The Doctor stood up and led Brevus over to the corner of the room, where they spoke quietly

‘Is this right?’ the Doctor asked. ‘Can Revan cause that much of a problem?’

‘Undoubtedly, if he knows where to place the charges,’ replied Brevus. ‘And with Akestus’s help, he will.’

‘It’s not his fault,’ said the Doctor through gritted teeth.

‘Perhaps not. But the damage will be tremendous – irreparable, probably.

At least in the time available. Spulver worm or not, he’ll be responsible for the death of every man, woman and child in Baktan. This ice mine is all we’ve got.’

The Doctor whacked the flat of his hand against the wall in frustration. ‘This is terrible. I really don’t have time for this!’

‘I thought it was never too late for you.’

‘Don’t be facetious. Come on, we’ve got to do something.’

‘What can we do? They’ve locked us in here.’

‘With static electricity?’ the Doctor scoffed. ‘One good rub with a balloon would open that lock. Get Akestus – we’ll need his help.’

‘Akestus?’ Brevus looked sceptical as he glanced at the old man huddled in the far corner.

‘You don’t think he’ll just want to sit there and let Revan get away with this, do you?’ asked the Doctor angrily. ‘Give him some credit – and maybe even the chance to reclaim some of his dignity.’

And so saying, the Doctor produced his sonic screwdriver and set to work on the door lock.

The small passageway outside was refreshingly empty of any slimers. The Doctor, Brevus and Akestus crept out of the annexe chamber and paused to get their bearings.

‘Have you got a plan?’ asked Brevus in a whisper.

‘I never have a plan,’ the Doctor whispered back. ‘Plans can go wrong.

That’s why the villain never wins – villains always have a plan.’

‘I see,’ said Brevus.

The Doctor turned to Akestus. ‘Where are the controls for the control-room power situated?’

‘In the control room,’ replied Akestus.

164

‘I knew you’d say that,’ the Doctor muttered peevishly. ‘I had hoped to cut the lights or something, throw Revan and his chums off guard. . . ’

‘You don’t need to go into the control room itself, though,’ Akestus continued enthusiastically. ‘This passage has an auxiliary access to the drill-head chamber. There are secondary controls there. Follow me.’

‘See?’ said the Doctor, grinning at Brevus. ‘There’s life in the old dog yet!’

The narrow access corridor did indeed terminate close by the cylindrical chamber that housed the complex pipework that controlled the steam excavator and deep-ice drill. Before emerging from the

narrow passageway, the Doctor stopped and conferred with Brevus and Akestus in hushed tones.

‘Akestus, have you any idea how long we’ve got before Revan detonates the bombs?’

‘None at all, Doctor. But I do know that he was organising timer mechanisms to activate them.’

‘Makes sense,’ muttered the Doctor. ‘He and his little army will want to get well clear of the mine before they blow it up.’

‘Army?’ queried Brevus worriedly. ‘How many slimers does he have with him?’

‘I counted two in here earlier when we first arrived, which with Revan and Manag makes four. Another two threw us in the holding cell, and I saw at least one other standing guard at the main control-room exit.’

‘Seven in total.’

‘Of which Revan is the most dangerous and vital. It’s more important that we stop him first, if we can.’ The Doctor fixed both of his comrades with a determined stare. ‘Decisive action will be required, gentlemen. It could get rough.’

‘I’m ready,’ said Akestus stoutly.

‘Me too,’ added Brevus.

The Doctor peered around the corner of the doorway and saw a slimer standing on guard with its back to him. He ducked silently back and indicated what the problem was. Brevus pulled a short dagger from his boot and pressed it into the Doctor’s hand. The Doctor regarded the weapon thoughtfully for a few seconds, weighing it in his grip. Then he tossed it from one hand to the other to assess its balance and feel. Finally he stepped, silent as cat, out on to the circular walkway. The slimer was still there, facing the other way. Its hood was down, exposing its glistening head and thick grey neck.

The Doctor pulled back his arm, paused, and then hurled the knife with all his strength. It spun through the intervening space and then hit the slimer, hilt first, against the back of his skull with a sharp thud.

‘You missed!’ cried Brevus in horror as the blade bounced off and clattered harmlessly along the floor.

‘Did I?’

Slowly the slimer sank to its knees and fell forward, stunned.

Almost immediately another stepped around the corner to see what had happened. Brevus launched himself at the mutant, colliding with him in what the Doctor considered a creditable rugby tackle, and brought him down. They struggled on the floor for several seconds until Akestus stepped forward and smashed the creature’s head in with a length of heavy steel pipe.

‘All right, that’s enough,’ said the Doctor, twisting the weapon out of the old man’s hand. ‘Let’s not get carried away. We only want to stop them blowing the mine up, not kill everyone in sight.’

‘That’s a pity, Doctor,’ rumbled a throaty voice from behind them. ‘I’d have liked to see you try.’

They turned slowly to see Manag and another slimer standing behind them, both with levelled handbows. ‘Drop the pipe, you old fool,’ Manag ordered.

Reluctantly, Akestus let the metal fall to the floor with a clang.

‘We give up,’ said the Doctor, raising his hands. ‘Again.’

Had anyone bothered to look they would have seen him slowly crossing his fingers.

166

Chapter Twenty-Three

Detonator

They were marched into the main control chamber, where another slimer waited by the big double exit doors.

‘Where’s Revan?’ asked the Doctor, still holding his hands up. ‘Never mind,’

snarled Manag. ‘Stand over there.’

‘Why? Are you going to execute us?’

‘If I have to,’ the slimer grunted. ‘But in the meantime, as it’s obviously pointless trying to lock you up, I intend to keep you here where I can see you.

You wait here, old man.’

The Doctor and Brevus turned to see Manag reach out and grab Akestus by the arm. The old Eskoni winced as he was yanked around, nearly losing his balance. Manag made sure he did so by punching him heavily across the jaw.

Akestus spun and collapsed with a groan.

The Doctor ran in front of Manag to prevent him following up the attack. ‘I told you before about unnecessary violence, Manag. I particularly disapprove of picking on old men.’

Manag’s reply was a vicious head-butt that sent the Doctor reeling back, clutching his face. ‘And that goes for me, too, actually,’ he mumbled, delicately exploring his split lip with a finger. ‘I’m not as young as I used to be. Or as old.’

‘Stop prattling!’

The Doctor appeared to hesitate. ‘Why?’ he asked eventually, dabbing at his lip with a handkerchief. ‘Are you going to stop me?’

It was a blatant and childish provocation, and Manag responded with appropriate aggression. He hurled himself at the Doctor with a roar, and the two of them went down fighting.

Which gave Brevus just the distraction he needed to snatch up the short sword that was lying on the worktop next to him. He trusted that this was what the Doctor had intended – he could see no other reason for his behaviour otherwise. The other slimers were charging forward to aid Manag, and the first caught Brevus’s sword blow full in the throat. With a choked gasp the mutant went down, almost dragging Brevus with him as he kept a grip on the sword.

167

The Doctor succeeded in scrambling free of Manag’s powerful grip more by luck than skill, and rolled clear. He was already up on one knee before the slimer was able to land another kick, this time in his ribs. The Doctor spun with the impact and crashed into a console support. He shook his head to clear his double vision and saw Manag

stand up before him, his mouth drawn back to expose the ring of spikes that passed for teeth. The Doctor knew one bite from those could take his throat right out if Manag had a mind to – and he certainly looked like he did now.

Suddenly a cloud of burning white vapour enveloped the slimer, seemingly from nowhere. Manag screamed and reared back, twisting and turning, but the cloud followed him. Through a boiling haze the Doctor saw Akestus holding something like a hose or pipe aimed directly at the mutant, a fierce blast of steam emerging from its muzzle. For a split second he thought it was a fire extinguisher, but then he traced the hose back to the open doorway leading to the drill head.

Somehow Akestus had released one of the steam-generator conduits from the excavation rig; searing water vapour was pouring out with a ferocious hiss.

Akestus had the jet aimed squarely at Manag, who was now backed up against one wall and screaming in agony. As they watched, the mutant staggered out of the cloud, trailing steam, his grey flesh sprouting huge translucent bubbles as the heat ate through his skin.

With a squelching thump he hit the floor and curled up, sluglike, the huge pustules of cooked flesh still emerging from his corpse. The mucus covering his body sizzled like hot fat. For a few seconds the body shuddered, knotted up and melted out of all recognition.

Akestus switched off the flow of steam and dropped the hose. His eyes were streaming with tears, probably due to the clouds of vapour roiling up towards the ceiling. The stench of boiled meat filled the air.

The Doctor was already on his feet, checking that both the old Eskoni and Brevus were unhurt. He counted two slimers dead. ‘The third one’s got away,’

he noted bitterly.

‘He’ll warn Revan,’ said Brevus.

Akestus suddenly jerked and stumbled forward into the Doctor’s arms. The old man sagged heavily against him, a handbow bolt jutting out of his back.

‘Sorry. . . ’ he croaked.

‘Revan!’ snarled Brevus, pointing at the wide doorway leading to the drill-head chamber where Revan had just appeared. The mutant leader ducked back, presumably to reload his handbow.

‘Stop!’ cried the Doctor, lowering Akestus’s body to the floor and sprinting for the chamber. He skidded through the doorway but found it empty. ‘Revan!’

Where are you?’

168

Silence – except for the sound of hoarse, laboured breathing. He was in the chamber somewhere, probably on the far side of the cylindrical steam excavator and drill head equipment at the centre.

The Doctor’s foot nudged something on the floor, and he looked down. An empty handbow.

‘Is this what you’ve come to, Revan?’ called the Doctor, stooping to retrieve the weapon. ‘Shooting old men in the back?’ No reply.

The Doctor glared at the handbow. He hated weapons, and this one was useless anyway, without ammunition. But then he recalled the bolt Mekulo had fired at him in the cavern, the one he had later removed from his own arm. It was still in his jacket pocket.

Slowly the Doctor pulled the slim projectile out and slid it into the receiver on the handbow. Its vicious barbed tip was still coated in the Doctor’s dried blood. It wouldn’t be enough to stop Revan, but. . .

‘I know you’re in here,’ said the Doctor calmly. ‘I can hear you.’

The breathing continued, but still no reply came.

The Doctor cocked the handbow and rested his finger on the trigger. ‘How long have we got, Revan? I assume you’ve already set the timers on the thermium charges. Ten minutes? Five minutes? One?’

Silence. The Doctor watched the polished metal wall that formed the circumference of the chamber. It wasn’t mirror-bright but it was highly reflective. As he moved slightly, the silver and grey images in the walls swirled and warped.

‘We’re on opposite sides of the central rig, Revan,’ said the Doctor. ‘The only way out is through me. If you go back down you’ll be

heading for the explosives.'

A terrible quiet seemed to have filled the room, bar the muted click and whirr of the drill machinery in the central column, ticking like a clock.

'Which way are you going to come, Revan?' asked the Doctor, raising the handbow. 'Left or right?'

'You won't shoot, Doctor!'

'Wrong,' said the Doctor, pulling the trigger. The bolt bounced off the encircling metal of the chamber wall and spun around the far side of the central column. With a cry of pain Revan lurched out of the other side, clutching his shoulder where the razor tip of the bolt had torn through his cloak.

And crashed right into the Doctor.

They flung each other around the chamber, clanging and smashing into the walls, each holding the other in an unbreakable grip. Revan snarled and snapped with his teeth at the Doctor's throat, his eyes as wide and mad as a cornered rat's. Finally the slimer managed to hurl the Doctor against the wall, cracking his head on the metal with sufficient force to stun him momentarily 169

and thus weaken his grip. Revan jerked free and disappeared through the nearest exit.

The door to the lower levels.

Where the bombs were.

The Doctor ran after him.

Brevus cradled Akestus in one arm, desperately trying to stop the old man's blood pumping out of the wound in his chest. The handbow bolt must have pierced his heart; Brevus could see the metallic tip poking out through the material of Akestus's tunic.

Akestus opened his eyes, but they were unfocused. 'Sorry,' he said again.

‘Did you. . . stop. . . him?’

Brevus shook his head. ‘The Doctor’s gone after Revan.’

‘Tell him. . . Revan set more charges. . . in the. . . ’ Akestus began to cough thickly.

‘What?’ demanded Brevus urgently. ‘Where? More charges where?’

Akestus’s eyes began to glaze over, and Brevus watched dumbly as the blood began to ooze more slowly from the hole in his chest.

‘Glad. . . I. . . was. . . able. . . to help,’ whispered Akestus, as the blood stopped flowing.

The Doctor raced after Revan, his feet clattering along the metallised walkway that led from the drill-head chamber. Revan had taken the stairs rather than the dropshaft to the lower level; the Doctor did the same, jumping the steps in sets of five and swinging himself around the switchback corners. His momentum kept him colliding with the walls but he couldn’t afford to sacrifice any speed for safety.

He emerged on to the steel grating of a walkway suspended over the next level, where the walls were bare rock. Directly below him something moved in the shadows, a hurriedly shambling figure, breathing hard, making for the power room. The Doctor could hear the hum of the static-electricity generators and feel it in the buzz through his shoes. Without thinking he vaulted over the gangway handrail and landed with terrific force on Revan’s back. The slimer hit the floor with a roar of surprise, the Doctor rolling clear just in time to avoid a powerful swipe of his fist.

For a second the two of them crouched, glaring at each other. A thick line of drool stretched from Revan’s O-shaped mouth to the floor. Through the open doorway behind him, the Doctor could hear the busy thrumming of the generator. That was where the first of the thermium charges had been planted.

‘Come to stop the countdown?’ asked the Doctor. Well, it was worth a try.

170

Revan let out a harsh, derisive laugh. ‘No, Doctor. I’ve come to detonate them manually.’

With surprising speed, the slimer launched himself at the Doctor, shoulder-ing him back through the generator-room door. They smashed into the control panel with enough force to dent the metal casing.

‘Sorry, Revan,’ gasped the Doctor. ‘Can’t let you do it.’

The Doctor took out the little paper sachet of salt from the motorway service station and shoved it with his thumb deep into Revan’s wet and snarling mouth. The thin paper tore and the salt poured out. The effect was instantaneous. With a bellow of pain, Revan tore himself free, clutching at his mouth and throat. The salt had caused the mucus membrane covering the interior of his mouth to swell up and froth with a dreadful yellow discharge. Howling and spitting, Revan lashed from side to side, flecks of the stuff spraying across the walls. The Doctor charged at him, lowering his head, and catapulted the slimer out through the open doorway.

The Doctor skidded to a halt, and then quickly doubled back, looking urgently all around the room for the bombs.

There were three in here – long cylindrical devices, silver with red and black ends and a simple timer mechanism built into the midsection. All three appeared to be dangerously close to the final red segment of the countdown.

The Doctor hooked out his sonic screwdriver with trembling fingers. Would it be possible to defuse all three of them in time? He was weak from loss of blood and the fight with Revan; his vision kept blurring and his arm ached where the handbow bolt had gone through. That wound was open again, the fingers of his left hand slippery with his own blood.

He examined the first charge. The casing was actually some kind of wire mesh, surrounding the electrical detonator inside. At the core was the thermium explosive itself. Not inherently unstable, but easily detonated within an electrical field. When the timer reached zero, the outer casing’s electrical field would be triggered and the thermium inside ignited.

Boom and zap all in one.

Working with feverish speed, the Doctor used his sonic screwdriver to over-ride the timer and then stabilise the bomb casing’s electrical potential. With two others to defuse as well, he could only hope that it would work.

He moved on to the next one, sweat diluting the blood streaked down his face.

I bet Fitz is sitting somewhere in Baktan with his feet up, he thought ruefully.

The second bomb fizzed and the timer stopped.

The Doctor shuffled over to the third, and then felt something heavy and angry slam into the small of his back. His head bounced painfully off the 171

console edge with a teeth-rattling thwack. He felt Revan's thick stubby fingers bite into his arms and spin him around. Growling, the slimer switched his vicelike grip to the Doctor's throat and squeezed like a maniac.

The Doctor managed to get his own fingers around Revan's neck and returned the pressure. Bit by bit he felt his fingers sinking into the slimy flesh.

He pressed harder. And harder. His thumbs were pressing deep into the mutant's throat, but he couldn't feel anything like the cartilage structure of a normal neck.

Gradually the Doctor forced the slaving monster down. Glutinous sputum frothed from Revan's lips as he snapped and bit the air between them. His eyes were the mad, round, white orbs of a creature with no reason.

The only chance the Doctor had was to overcome the slimer physically. He added the weight of his shoulders to his hands, desperately trying to close the throat enough for Revan to at least weaken. The slimer's grip on his own neck seemed to be redoubling its pressure every second. The Doctor could hear the blood pounding in his ears, a frenzied pulse driven by the wild hammering of two hearts.

Didn't these creatures feel pain? he wondered, pressing down so deeply now with his thumbs that he thought he must soon be able to feel the floor beneath the slimer's neck.

'Doctor!' said Brevus, suddenly appearing in the doorway.

The Doctor glanced up. Revan pulled and threw the Time Lord sideways with a frantic heave. The Doctor rolled and started to choke, suddenly able to breathe again. His throat felt as if it were still being

squeezed in a vice.

Revan dived across the generator room and ripped the last thermium bomb from the wall.

‘Revan!’ gagged the Doctor, fruitlessly raising his hand to ward off the inevitable.

Brevus grabbed the Doctor by the scruff of the neck and hauled him back out of the room. The last thing the Doctor saw was Revan enveloped by a sudden blaze of orange light as he triggered the thermium reaction. Then the explosion tore the slimer into shreds and sprayed him out through the door in a pinkish-grey mist. A coruscating field of scarlet light poured out after him, and the Doctor and Brevus shielded their eyes.

When the explosion had finished, there was only silence. The generator had stopped working, reduced to so much slag and scrap metal.

Brevus helped the Doctor up. ‘Doctor, Akestus said there’re more bombs!’

‘More?’ The Doctor glanced at the smoking remains of the power room, and the glistening debris coating its walls. ‘That’s why he came down here. He’s linked them in a chain reaction.’

172

Even as he said the words, they felt the first of the explosions from deep below. A distant, thunderous rumble which shook the rock wall they were leaning against, and made the metal stairwell rattle and vibrate. More explosions followed, deeper and deeper, each percussive blast sending a gust of unnaturally warm air up from the depths of the mine.

They felt the effects as far away as Baktan itself. The ground trembled, long enough for every single person in the city to stop talking, arguing, playing, and loving – to just stop and listen. And feel the muted resonance beneath their feet, and look at one another with sudden, absolute foreboding.

Fitz instinctively grabbed hold of Florence. He pulled her closer, holding her tightly until the quake was over, and a fine stream of dust floated down from the ceiling.

She looked up at him with fear in her eyes again.

Deep beneath the ice mine itself, the thermium charges blasted through the pipelines that transported the melted ice all the way to Baktan. The pressure wave of each detonation caused rockslides and earthquakes far below. Icebergs the size of cathedrals cracked and shifted, sending showers of crystalline fragments falling into the blackest recesses of the planet. Rocks and boulders tumbled from the interlocking faces of subterranean mountains rammed up against each other, unmoving, for millennia.

Compassion felt the tremor almost before it had begun. She braced herself a second prior to the first explosion, hugging the rock face she was climbing.

For a moment she thought she would be thrown clear, but she dug in deeper and waited it out. Shards of granite rained down on her, and the ice mass moved overhead in a deafening crescendo.

Then the water came.

The thermium devices – for she had easily identified the source of the commotion – were designed to speed-melt vast tracts of ice. Their effect would be felt by any ice that was within the blast radius. She didn't know exactly how far that was, but something had taken the brunt of the detonation, and now there was water everywhere. Freezing torrents of it pouring down the rock face, rushing over her hands and face, slamming her into the stone and threatening to push her off. She felt like a spider trying to avoid being flushed down the plughole of a bath. She'd climbed this far, though, and she was damned if she was going to do it all again.

Eventually the waterfall petered out, and she was left cold and sodden, ice water running from her clothes and hair. She flashed microwave energy around her exterior plasmic shell and vaporised the excess water in a violent hiss.

173

Annoyed, she began climbing again with renewed vigour.

When she

reached a massive V-shaped canyon in the rock, she realised that this was probably once filled with compacted ice running through the ground in a seam. Until a few minutes ago, anyway. Now it was empty

– melted.

No, not empty.

There was something in there. She started forward, walking into the open seam, head bent to avoid the overhanging rocks and odd lumps of dripping ice. She could see something in the deep gloom up ahead. Something large, and round. In the dim glow of the phosphorescent lichen growing on the walls, the things appeared almost pearlescent.

There were more up ahead, and even more further on, all piled on top of one another and coated in some thick, sticky jam that must have kept the things insulated from the ice.

She began to clamber over them. The seam had been cleared of ice and now presented a direct and relatively easy route upwards. Compassion didn't know where it led – she was utterly lost. All she knew was that she had to continue to move upwards, and eventually she would reach daylight.

It didn't really matter how long it took.

She slipped on one of the round objects and quickly corrected her balance.

Maybe she'd have to be a little more cautious after all. Then she half slid off the next, before realising that her balance was in fact perfect – it was the eggs that were moving.

Eggs. Why had she thought that?

Another one moved beneath her foot.

They were all beginning to move.

She peered more closely, enhancing her night vision to its maximum potential. Through the dim grey shell of the nearest egg she could see something moving inside. Something large and shapeless.

And the same in the next one.

And the next.

They were full of things, things that were starting to flex and move within their embryonic prisons. Things that wanted out.

Then she heard the first of the cracking noises as one of the shells

behind her split wide open.

174

Chapter Twenty-Four

Sins of the Father

‘Tor Grymna,’ said the leading Eskoni, his voice heavy with menace. ‘What is the meaning of this?’

This last was said with a strange, damnable contempt that previously Tor Grymna had employed himself only when speaking to others. Never in his long life had anyone had the audacity – or the reason – to address him with such disdain. For a second he was confounded into silence, with one thing uppermost in his mind: he did not appreciate being spoken to like that.

‘Veyikam,’ he said after what appeared to be only a moment’s pause. ‘I might ask the same question of you.’

There was the tiniest hint of a shake in Tor Grymna’s voice, and it was this perhaps that gave Veyikam the courage to continue. ‘Kindly do not answer a question with a question,’ he retorted sharply. ‘That is something I know that you have never tolerated yourself, Tor Grymna.’

Tor Grymna, although stung by the accuracy of the remark, remained impassive.

Veyikam drew himself up to his unimpressive height and said, ‘If I had not witnessed this with my own eyes, Tor Grymna, I should never have believed it.’

One of the other Eskoni dignitaries standing a little behind Veyikam had built up enough of his own nerve to add, ‘A slimer, Tor Grymna! Here, in your own apartment!’

There was a scandalised, and dangerous, buzz of concern through the little group of Eskoni crowded into the entrance of Tor Grymna’s home. They had followed the slimer in the corridor all the way here, promising to expel him from the nearest window at the very least – and kill him on the spot at the most. The mutant had run unerringly towards this one apartment, and, after hurling open the door, had rushed inside. Those pursuing Eskoni first on the scene were shocked by what they saw: the slimer, cowering with fear, on the far side of

the room, with Tor Grymna staring at the door with blazing anger.

‘Let us pass, Tor Grymna,’ said a third impatiently. ‘We’ll hold the beggar here until the Custodians arrive. They’ll skewer it and toss the remains out double quick.’

175

‘No.’

The word was not spoken loudly, or with any hint of passion. It was plainly said and simple enough.

‘Get out of my home,’ added Tor Grymna, ‘immediately. Or I shall call the Custodians to remove *you*.’

‘But – the slimer. . . ’ protested Veyikam. He glanced past Tor Grymna and watched the mutant huddled in its rags against the far wall, shivering. Its skin glistened evilly beneath – what was that? One of Tor Grymna’s own cloaks?

‘I’ll deal with him,’ said Tor Grymna levelly. ‘Now go.’

‘Him?’ echoed the belligerent one. ‘Him? How can you tell? It’s an it.

Those things are baseless creatures, Tor Grymna, as well you know. Worthless vermin. I’m surprised at you.’

A sudden commotion in the doorway heralded the arrival of a Custodian armed with a short sword. He nodded in deference to Veyikam but then stopped dead when he saw Tor Grymna. ‘What seems to be the trouble, sir?’

Before Tor Grymna could reply, Veyikam pointed a long bony finger at the mutant in the corner. ‘There’s a slimer here, you blind dolt! Kill it!’

The Custodian moved forward, raising his sword, and the slimer cringed.

But Tor Grymna caught the guard by the arm and pulled him back with incredible strength. ‘Leave him.’

‘But –’

‘ *I said, leave him!* ’ This time Tor Grymna roared with anger and hurled the Custodian back into the pack of Eskoni officials. They fell

over each other in ridiculous confusion, shouting and squabbling. Tor Grymna surged forward.

‘Get out, all of you! *Out!*’

Such was the ferocity of his attack that everyone hastily withdrew, including the guard. Once the room was clear Tor Grymna slammed the door shut with a crack like thunder. Then he turned on the pathetic thing crouched in the far corner of the room.

‘Get up!’

Slowly, Ckeho got to his feet. ‘They. . . they were going. . . to kill me,’ he croaked.

For a few seconds his father just breathed harshly, as if trying to control his temper. ‘Not while I am here,’ he growled.

The Doctor and Brevus returned from the ice mine in a glum mood. The generator was wrecked, and the first stages of the pipelines were completely destroyed. There was little that could be salvaged, and they had to get back to Baktan as soon as possible. As it was, they took the time to bury the dead in the hot sand outside – the Custodians that had been killed by the slimers, and, at the Doctor’s insistence, the slimers themselves. Digging the dry loose 176

sand had not been hard, but, even in the shade of the mine itself, it had been blisteringly hot work. The Doctor’s shirt had stuck to his chest and arms like a second skin, and now they both welcomed the approach of evening with its slightly less intense temperatures.

They rode the sandcar in thoughtful silence. Brevus kept his eye fixed on the shimmering horizon, steering towards the city, while the Doctor sat and stared at the lustrous orange sunset. He didn’t seem to need to look away from the coruscating disc of light, or even blink. Brevus didn’t know what he was thinking about, but assumed it was something to do with Compassion.

Despite his apparent lack of concern, and confidence in the girl’s ability to survive, Brevus sensed that the Doctor was a little disappointed – not to say puzzled – by Compassion’s failure to return. Brevus simply could not conceive of any being capable of surviving a fall like that, and secretly presumed she was dead. The Doctor would come to terms with it sooner or later, probably.

Also, he knew the Doctor well enough by now to realise that the

events in the mine itself – the violent confrontation with Revan and his people, and the subsequent damage to the equipment there – were weighing heavily on his shoulders. The cuts and bruises that disfigured the Doctor's noble features, the swollen lip and bandaged arm, were nothing to him compared with his sense of failure.

Brevus had said, when the last slimer had been buried and he had first noticed the Doctor's long, sorrowful countenance, 'We won, Doctor. We won.'

The Doctor had simply shaken his head. 'No, Brevus. As soon as you have to use physical violence, you've lost.'

Brevus didn't think that this was necessarily true, and he suspected the Doctor didn't either – he had been curiously adept at physical violence for someone who professed to avoid it at all costs – but Brevus recognised that the Doctor was, perhaps, referring to the plight of the slimers more than his own actions.

By the time they reached Baktan it was dark, but not dark enough to hide the fact that things had not gone well in their absence.

There were fires burning outside the city walls; parts of the shantytown were ablaze. As the sandcar grew closer, they could see black shapes huddled around the bonfires, cruel little eyes peering out from under sooty hoods, glittering like drops of blood in the flickering light.

Skins of thick oily smoke rose up from the orange flames, while formless shapes within the crackling pyres showed the occasional blackened rib or skull.

The Doctor observed the conflagration with a stony expression. He seemed oblivious to the rank, acidic odour belching from the fires. His attention

177

turned finally to the towering cliff of Baktan itself, black as a tombstone in the night, its lowermost levels reflecting the burning pit that surrounded it.

High above he could see the city lights glowing a safe, distant yellow.

'What's happened here?' demanded Brevus as the sandcar drew level with the city gates. They were opened by a pair of weary-looking Custodians with scarves tied around their mouths. The sandcar was herded through, rocks and stones clattering off its rear end as the

slimers hurled abuse. A few burning sticks arced through the night air and bounced off the city walls in a shower of golden sparks.

The Doctor dismounted without a word and strode towards the ramp that led up into the city grounds proper. His eyes were like chips of ice beneath grimy and blood-encrusted brows. He charged through the melee of curious Eskoni and headed for the central escalators, Brevus hurrying to catch him up.

‘Wait, Doctor!’ the Eskoni called. ‘Stop! You need to rest, to recover from –’

‘There’s no time to rest,’ he snapped, mounting the escalator three steps at a time. ‘I want to find out what’s been going on here.’

It was, seemingly, all over Baktan. The whispers had started, and grown to a hush, a rumble, and then a scandalised roar.

Tor Grymna had a son, and his son was a slimer.

Worse, the slimer had not been expelled from the city, like all other slimers before him.

Anavolus shook his head sadly. He stood at his usual position by the Forum chamber windows, gazing out at the lowering night. Anavolus felt old, old and bent down with worries and problems. In his youth these things had excited and invigorated him. Now they just wore him down, like a cripple.

With a sigh he moved back to his seat and sat down.

‘It was only to be expected,’ remarked Old Krumm coldly. ‘You can’t keep something like that a secret for ever. Never did trust him, mind. Eyes too close together, too dark.’

Anavolus looked up wearily. ‘Is that all you have to offer? Hindsight?’

Old Krumm chuckled vindictively. ‘That’s all there is left, Anavolus my boy.

What does the future hold? Nothing much to look forward to, I’ll be bound.’

‘Tor Grymna is a gifted member of this city Forum,’ Anavolus insisted. ‘It doesn’t matter what his personal situation is. He has always dedicated himself to the prosperity of Baktan, and the success of our

families. No one could have given more than Tor Grymna.'

'Prosperity?' cackled Old Krumm. 'We're dying. Any fool can see that.'

The double doors to the Forum chamber swung open and Fitz marched in with an Eskoni girl. The Earthman looked flustered and a little scared, but it

was the kind of fear that lent courage.

'What's the meaning of this?' demanded Anavolus, getting to his feet. 'And what's she doing here?'

'She's with me,' said Fitz simply. 'And we're here to see you. I suppose you've heard about your mate Tor Grymna's little problem?'

Anavolus nodded.

'Everyone's talking about it,' said Fitz. 'Scandal of the century, if you ask me.'

But to be honest, I don't give a cuss about him or anyone else here. Except my friends. That includes Florence here, and also Ckeho. That's your mate's boy, by the way. Quiet lad, a bit scared. Kept prisoner because he's a mutant. Ring any bells?'

Anavolus blinked slowly. 'Is there a point to this intrusion, Captain Kreiner?'

Only we have problems of our own to attend.'

'Too right. One of them is the shantytown. Who in hell's name thought of trying to torch it? That's murder!'

'It was my idea,' said a powerful voice from behind them. Fitz whirled around to find Tor Grymna filling the doorway, towering over him. 'It was my idea to destroy the slimers for good. It would have made the situation less complicated had it succeeded.'

'Less complicated?' Fitz was appalled.

'Now, it is more complicated than ever.' Tor Grymna strode imperiously into the room and stood before Anavolus and Old Krumm. He did not bow his head, but stopped short of walking between them. 'Fellow members of the Forum of Baktan, I offer you my resignation.'

Anavolus looked dismayed. 'Resignation?'

‘In the light of recent events, I do not believe that I can serve this city honourably or honestly. I ask to be released from my duties.’

‘Oh no,’ said Fitz. ‘You’re not getting away with it that easily!’ He stalked across and stood before the towering Eskoni. ‘There’s a whole lot wrong with this city and this Forum in particular. Betrayals, prejudice, slavery, murder –

and let’s not forget the rampant nepotism. You’re not going to just walk away from that.’

Tor Grymna regarded Fitz coolly for several seconds. ‘And what, then, do you suggest we do?’

Fitz opened his mouth to reply, but found there were no more words. The eyes of all three Eskoni leaders were on him, and he knew that Florence would be looking up to him as well.

‘It seems’, said Anavolus after an interminable pause, ‘that no one has the answer. Who can save us now?’

‘Good evening!’ announced the Doctor, barging through the doors. Brevus limped along behind him, utterly breathless.

179

‘Fitz!’ the Doctor cried, grabbing his friend by the hand and shaking it vigorously. ‘How marvellous to see you again!’

‘Doctor!’ There was no disguising the elation in Fitz’s voice, or the ear-to-ear grin on his face. This was replaced by a look of sudden concern as he took in the Time Lord’s dishevelled state. ‘What in the name of muck happened to you?’

‘Never mind about that now,’ he said with the infuriating insouciance that Fitz adored. ‘What’s been going on here? I’m only away for a day and someone tries to commit genocide. I suppose that was you, was it?’ This last was aimed squarely at Tor Grymna. ‘I thought conditions for the slimers were bad before, but what I saw on the way in here tonight is unforgivable.’

Strangely, Tor Grymna remained silent.

‘What a pathetic thing to do,’ said the Doctor scornfully. ‘As if wiping the slimers out was going to help anyone. The mutations would continue. You’d have to murder each of them, one by one as they

happened, in cold blood, just to maintain the status quo. Nothing would change. No one would know the reason for it, or how to stop it. But you'd clear that unsightly mess from Baktan's doorstep, wouldn't you? Sweep it all under the carpet. You're a fool.'

The chamber was thick with silence. All that could be heard was the soft brush of the Doctor's shoes on the stone floor as he stalked slowly around its circumference. Suddenly everyone in the room was waiting on the Doctor's every word. If you're worried about Revan, by the way,' continued the Doctor,

'then don't. He's dead. He and a group of his fellows mounted a suicidal attack on the ice mine. I'm afraid they succeeded in destroying the pipelines that provide Baktan with its water. You've got what's left in your tanks and that's it. No more tea.'

The Doctor stepped into the centre of the chamber, noble and dignified, despite his torn and grubby jacket and trousers, his wild tangle of hair and bloodstained face. 'But if you think that's your biggest problem, you're wrong.'

Compassion ploughed through the squirming mass, oblivious to the individual horror of what surrounded her, but blinded by the dark and the sheer number of the things as they emerged from their eggs. They burst through the brittle shells and lunged sightlessly at her and each other, snapping and sucking in a way that deterred further examination. They couldn't hurt her, but some vestigial sense of revulsion left from her time as a human being forced her to hurry. She climbed over them and through them, all the time heading up, towards the slight increase in warmth that she could now detect through the rigid cold of the rock.

She was near the surface. She had to be. Just a little further.

* * *

180

'So let me get this straight,' said Fitz. 'There's a giant man-eating worm living in the caves beneath that ice mine?'

'Worm is something of a misnomer, actually,' replied the Doctor. His account of the expedition had met with a stunned silence; he didn't know what had shocked the Forum most – the existence of the Spulver worm, Mekulo's betrayal or Revan's suicide attack on the mine. Fitz, of course, went for the obvious. 'It is more properly a member of the

phylum Mollusca,’ the Doctor went on, ‘which, on your planet, includes slugs, snails, clams and squids. The Spulver, um, thing, is actually a fascinating amalgam of univalve gastropod and cephalopod. . . ,’

Anavolus coughed by way of a surprisingly polite interruption. ‘But whatever it is, it is responsible for the slimers?’

‘I still do not understand the connection,’ grumbled Tor Grymna, who had been uncharacteristically quiet during the Doctor’s little speech.

‘The Spulver worm is terribly injured,’ explained the Doctor eagerly ‘It’s carrying an enormous wound, which has formed an abscess. The pus from that abscess – the spent blood serum, dead leukocytes and bacteria – is leaking out and contaminating the ice fields that your mine has been converting into water. Water that is then pumped directly into Baktan, carrying with it a host of pathogenic alien bacteria. There would be no way of telling exactly how this cocktail of mutagenic toxins might affect the indigenous genetics of this planet – but I suspect the slimers are a good indication. The Spulver worm was genetically engineered to survive and proliferate – the instructions are written into its very DNA. Bringing it into contact with your own DNA would have only one result – the Spulver worm’s DNA would attempt to rewrite the local genetic template in its own image.’

Fitz shifted uncomfortably. ‘So the slimers are effectively half man, half slug?’

‘Arrogant nonsense,’ stormed Tor Grymna.

‘Possibly,’ said the Doctor with chilling calm. ‘But Ckeho and his like are something else altogether, Fitz, an entirely new hybridised species: to destroy them unequivocally, whatever their origin, would be genocide. The sad fact is that like many accidental combinations of totally alien biologies, there is little chance of their long-term survival. They can’t reproduce. Ultimately they just expire, as their bodies fight to become secondary, failed Spulver-worm embryos.’

Fitz shuddered as he remembered the effects of the Squirming.

Quietly, the Doctor added, ‘Even so, there’s no reason for them to have to live in poverty and degradation.’

Tor Grymna bridled at the Doctor’s accusing stare, but Anavolus quickly cut in: ‘But what can we do about it, Doctor?’

‘Well, the source of the contamination must be removed as soon as possible if your people are to survive.’

‘It must be destroyed!’ declared Tor Grymna, slamming a massive fist down on the back of his chair.

‘I thought you might say that,’ muttered the Doctor. ‘Destroying it would actually be very difficult: it’s survived this long despite its injuries and in appalling conditions. I favour a more humane approach.’

Fitz practically choked. ‘Humane? This is a class-A1 monster we’re talking about, Doc. Let’s kill it!’

Even as he spoke, Fitz couldn’t quite believe that he was actually agreeing with Tor Grymna. He gave him a hostile look just to prove that the agreement was coincidental.

The Doctor sighed patiently. ‘The Spulver worm is lost, injured and very probably in a lot of pain. It deserves the same chance of survival as anything –

or anyone – else. Besides which, destroying it might not be enough – somehow the toxins must be flushed right out of the water supply at source.’

‘How?’ asked Anavolus bluntly.

‘I haven’t the faintest idea,’ replied the Doctor.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Best-Laid Schemes

The sand exploded downwards, beautifully hot and scalding, blinding, consuming. Compassion let it run down over her head and shoulders and cascade through her outstretched fingers. A few small lumps of sandstone fell with it, tickling her as they bounced off her face and shoulders, and at least one lizard hiding in the sediment tumbled past.

For a moment she paused, enjoying the burning shower. Then she hauled herself upwards again, towards the blur of light above, which was obscured by the torrent of sand but becoming more and more

apparent. Eventually she scrambled out of the hole, sand raining from her body like dry water, and she stood upright. She looked up into the blazingly empty black sky and its wash of stars with an exultant ‘ Yes! ,

Behind her sand continued to slide into the crevice from which she had emerged. Chunks of the earth gave way and dropped into the gap. If she stared down into the gaping wound in the ground, she could just about see things moving – crawling and wriggling with feverish energy, hundreds of them, pale in the sunless gloom. They filled the rotten cavity below her feet like grubs infesting a carcass.

She became aware of a profusion of sensory information borne on the night-time air: the crackle and pop of flames nearby, the heat, the jagged orange spikes of fire. Before her rose the first monolithic foundations of Baktan city.

She had finally found a way out of the ground via the cracks surrounding the city walls, the same cracks that she and the Doctor had examined not so long ago. Cracks that were now a man’s width across and full of giant, squirming slugs.

The Forum chamber was oddly silent, but for the low murmur of the Eskoni leaders deliberating at its centre. Anavolus and Old Krumm were discussing their options, while Brevus hovered nearby, not entirely sure of his position at this level of the hierarchy, but reluctant to join the Doctor and Fitz by the window. They appeared to be discussing the same problem, but, Brevus suspected, from a slightly more technical viewpoint. Anavolus and Old Krumm seemed to content to consider the political and social ramifications of the 183

Doctor’s story – twittering between the presence of an alien monster lurking deep beneath the surface of their planet and the consequences of the slimer problem.

Tor Grymna was, for his part, pacing the room like the caged and angry skefider beast of Eskoni legend. Dallufvir alone knew what he was thinking now.

The Doctor and Fitz were gazing solemnly at their reflections in the stained-glass window. Fitz was nervously chewing his thumbnail while the Doctor, in his shirtsleeves, was allowing the young Eskoni girl who had grown so attached to Fitz to dress the wound in his arm. The Doctor’s face looked pale and impassive in the scarlet-coloured glass, and there was a faraway gleam in his violet eyes.

Fitz was watching the Doctor too. He was rather concerned about the state of his friend now. He looked as if he had been badly beaten up, and the injury to his upper left arm was quite alarming. Florence had cleaned most of the dried blood away, but the flesh was bruised and swollen. The Doctor had explained, briefly, about the crossbow bolt and the very thought of it made Fitz feel distinctly unwell. But what was even more disturbing was the notion that the Doctor was throwing himself into this particular fray with almost reckless abandon. Fitz had never known him to shy away from violent exercise when necessary, but this smacked of wilful self-neglect. Could it be conceivable that the Doctor was trying to distract himself – his own formidable mind – from the sudden loss of his TARDIS? It had been his home, after all, for centuries probably. Fitz missed the old thing terribly, so what must the Doctor feel like?

Fitz found it hard to believe that the Time Lord was working up some kind of subconscious death wish – personal angst just wasn't in his nature – but there was something up.

The way he was just staring at nothing while Florence bandaged him up –

it was kind of creepy, really. Fitz hoped he was just letting his brain grapple with the problems at hand, and not moping over the TARDIS, or Compassion, or even where he was going to get another decent cup of tea.

Compassion – there was another problem. The Doctor had told him about that. Fitz waited until Florence had carefully rolled the sleeve of the Doctor's shirt back down over her dressing and then said, in what he hoped might just be a catalyst in prompting some kind of response, 'It's funny you should have said "flush" before. . . '

The Doctor looked up quizzically, possibly expecting some kind of inappropriate lavatorial humour.

Swallowing, Fitz continued, 'I mean, when I worked at that garden centre, when I first met you, I used to get rid of slugs and snails with the hosepipe.

184

Squish! And they were gone, straight down the nearest drain.'

The Doctor blinked, almost as if he hadn't heard. His mind was on something else, perhaps, like how he was going to repair the hole in

his coat sleeve.

Then he leapt up and grabbed Fitz by the shoulders with sudden laughter.

‘Brilliant!’ he yelled. ‘Brilliant! Of course. Fitz, that’s positively excellent. Well done!’

A glow of pleasure enveloped Fitz, mixed with some relief that the Doctor hadn’t kissed him in his sudden enthusiasm. Instead the Doctor snatched up his frock coat and headed for the door.

‘Wait a minute!’ Fitz called after him.

The Doctor skidded to a stop. ‘What? What?’

‘Where are you going? What did I say that was so brilliant? Come on, out with the explanation – now, not later!’

The Forum leaders had also turned to listen, alerted by the sudden commotion.

The Doctor swept his hair back from his forehead with one hand. ‘Don’t you see? The solution’s been staring us in the face. We have to flush the Spulver worm and the toxins out, and that’s exactly what we can do.’

‘How?’ asked Brevus.

‘It’s so simple, only Fitz could’ve thought of it,’ enthused the Doctor. ‘It should be possible to use thermium explosives to speed-melt the entire ice reservoir above the Spulver worm’s cavern. There must be millions – no, billions, of tons of water locked up there waiting to. . . to. . . whoosh down through the cave system if we released it all in one go. The flow of water will be diverted through the cavern and then into the natural fault in the rock Compassion discovered when she examined the ice-mine computer records –

sufficient to take the creature and its contaminating leukocytes with it!’

Such was the Doctor’s excitement that Fitz almost found himself laughing with him. ‘Is that possible?’

The Doctor whirled to face Brevus. ‘The thermium explosives – they do work according to the laws of general thermionics, I presume? By

that I mean the chain-reaction process is based on a moderated structural-bond energy release?’

‘Yes,’ confirmed the Eskoni. ‘Yes, it could work – at least, we could convert the ice to water almost instantly, if the thermium charges were placed correctly. Although’, he added less encouragingly, ‘that would be difficult.’

‘What’s the problem?’ asked Fitz.

‘Well, the sheer size of the iceberg for a start. It would be an extremely hazardous operation – you’d have to place the charges manually, in very harsh conditions.’

‘And right under the nose of this Spulver thing, right?’

185

‘Yes, that too.’

‘That settles it, then,’ declared the Doctor. ‘Only I can do it – everyone else’s body temperature will put them at too much risk.’

Fitz shook his head. ‘Come off it, Doc. You maybe the coolest guy this side of the Milky Way, but not by that much. If that thing gets a sniff of your body heat, you’re its next meal.’

‘Maybe we could go with you, as decoys,’ suggested Brevus. ‘The Spulver worm would naturally go for us first rather than you, just as it did with Mekulo and his men.’

‘Er, hang on a mo,’ argued Fitz. ‘Let’s not get too gung-ho about this.’

‘Maybe it does need a bit more thought,’ agreed the Doctor.

They felt the tremor then, just slightly, a minute vibration sensed only through the soles of their feet. They just had time to glance apprehensively at one another before the earthquake hit.

Everyone, the Doctor included, suddenly crouched a little lower, spreading hands and feet in a primitive response to the sudden physical dislocation.

From somewhere deep beneath them came an ominous, tangible cracking sound.

‘What’s going on?’ Anavolus’s voice rang out over the confusion.

‘It’s a flippin’ earthquake, you moron,’ shouted Fitz.

But the next thing he knew it was all over: just as he thought the whole building – sod it, the whole city – was about to come down, everything went quiet again. Perfectly still, except for the dust of dislodged plaster and sand that seemed to hang nervously in the air.

Suddenly the Forum chamber was full of Eskoni officials as well as dust, all clucking and buzzing around Anavolus and Old Krumm. Old Krumm was merely looking slightly bewildered, as if he didn’t fully realise what they had all just experienced.

‘We’ve got to get out of here,’ said Fitz, making for the door, only to be grabbed and spun around by the Doctor.

‘Wait wait wait. It’s pointless running now,’ said the Doctor, gently but firmly. ‘Keep calm. It’s over for now.’

Brevus stepped up. ‘Why did that happen?’

‘Revan’s sabotage must have affected the geological fault lines more than I realised,’ responded the Doctor. ‘Maybe that was just an aftershock.’

‘Maybe?’ echoed Fitz.

‘Or maybe it was a sign of things to come.’

‘Hell’s teeth! Can things get any worse?’

‘They certainly can,’ said a voice from the doorway. ‘I’ve got some bad news for you all.’

Standing in the swirling dust was a short female figure with coppery hair.

186

‘Compassion!’ exploded the Doctor. He sounded genuinely relieved and delighted, but then, thought Fitz, Compassion was their only ticket off this stupid planet. And right now the urge to jump aboard her and vamoose was very strong indeed.

The Doctor had bounded over to Compassion but refrained, at the last moment, from hugging her. Instead he began to brush the plaster dust vigorously from his velvet jacket as he gabbled at her: ‘Thank goodness you’re here! We need your help.’ Only then did the Doctor

seem to notice there was something amiss – a slightly distracted look in Compassion’s grey eyes. ‘You are all right, aren’t you?’

If she was touched by his concern, she didn’t show it. ‘I experienced some internal systems disorientation after the fall. My architectural configuration is still in misalignment.’

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, ‘I’m sure you’ll be fine.’

‘Nice to have a professional diagnosis,’ commented Fitz.

‘Never mind that,’ said Compassion bluntly. ‘You’ve a more immediate problem right here on your doorstep.’

‘Meaning what, exactly?’ Fitz wanted to know.

Compassion turned to address the Doctor, the only person she ever really felt worthy of calling intelligent. And that was stretching a point, sometimes.

‘I climbed back up to the surface via the subterranean fissures in the rock.

There was some kind of explosion, which opened up a lot more cracks. The percussion signature and pressure-wave pattern suggested an unmodulated thermium reaction. . . ’

‘Revan’s handiwork, I’m afraid,’ admitted the Doctor. ‘He tried to destroy the ice mine.’

Compassion didn’t appear to be bothered. ‘Whatever the cause, it melted an ice seam containing a large number of membranous eggs containing some kind of aggressive invertebrate parasite.’

‘Oh no,’ said Fitz.

‘Oh no,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘No, no, no, no, no.’

Brevus looked from one to the other. ‘What does this mean?’

The Doctor sighed heavily. ‘The Spulver worm’s done exactly what its most basic instinct, and its genetic programming, has told it to do when faced with imminent death. It has tried to ensure its species’ survival by reproduction.

What Compassion has found are its eggs.’

‘Don’t tell me there’s not just the mother of all creepy-crawlies down there,’

groaned Fitz, ‘but a daddy too.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I shouldn’t think so. Like a slug, it can fertilise itself if necessary and generate its own offspring.’

‘You mean the thing made itself pregnant?’

187

‘It’s not uncommon among hermaphrodite species,’ the Doctor said. ‘In the circumstances, though, congratulations hardly seem appropriate.’

‘Hold on,’ interrupted Compassion. ‘Have you seen the progenitor of these eggs?’

‘I’m afraid so. It’s called a Spulver worm.’

‘Think of a cross between a slug and a squid,’ said Fitz helpfully, ‘and then imagine it the size of Wembley stadium.’

‘You’ve seen it?’ Compassion was impressed.

‘Alas,’ said Fitz, ‘I have not had that pleasure. I know it only by repute.’

The Doctor was still thinking hard. ‘It must have given birth to its young a long time ago – perhaps when it first arrived on Eskon.’

‘It’s not native to this planet, then?’ Compassion asked.

‘Originated in the Aayavex system,’ the Doctor muttered, his thoughts now clearly elsewhere. ‘Don’t know how it got all the way here, though.’

‘In a spaceship,’ said Compassion. ‘I’ve seen the wreckage – I found a crashed spacecraft embedded in the ice below ground, registered as passing through the Aayavex system. Could it have come on board that?’

‘Most probably,’ said the Doctor. ‘Perhaps it was cargo, or even just a stray egg. There was a lot of scientific interest in the Aayavex III ecosystem following the genetics war. It’s possible someone might have wanted to take a live Spulver worm away for study. It’s academic now, anyway. The Spulver worm found itself here and made itself at

home. I think it must have been injured in the crash, and that prompted it to lay the eggs. It must have left them frozen in the ice.'

'And now Revan's bombs have thawed them out,' said Brevus.

'And the sudden increase in temperature is causing them to hatch,' added Compassion. 'They looked to be in an ugly mood, too.'

'How many would you say?' asked the Doctor.

'Upwards of a million.'

There was a stunned silence. How can she say something like that and sound so casual? thought Fitz.

'Wh-what will happen?' wondered Brevus apprehensively. 'What will they do?'

'Isn't it obvious?' retorted the Doctor. 'They'll be mobile and heading for anywhere they can sense food, and lots of it. Here, for example.'

188

Chapter Twenty-Six

Food Chain

It started in the farms situated near the base of the giant stone monolith that formed Baktan city, not too far from the cultivated areas and grain stores.

Livestock were kept in long containment halls, some of them free to roam if they required the exercise, others tethered or caged to save space.

The livestock mainly included gizran reptiles – fattened and ready for slaughter in time for the Feast of the Fifth Moon celebrations – balberks and hemmins with their wings clipped, and huge leathery-skinned mogoths. These last were kept chained and sedated, just to make handling easier, but they were not actually excitable creatures. They were farmed for both their milk and their meat.

Now, however, the mogoths were agitated. They could sense something, something that stirred the fear centres in their minuscule brains beneath the shaggy-furred double skulls. They grunted and hawked, spitting out pungent saliva to warn off predators they no longer knew.

But it was no use. The things that were coming for them now were not native to the planet Eskon, and did not even acknowledge the defensive aroma.

They moved through the matted straw around the mogoths' shuffling feet, leaving trails of thick silvery slime to glisten in the lamplight.

The first mogoths groaned with pain as the things bit deeply and mercilessly.

The others began to sway nervously, pulling at their metal leashes, straining at the massive stone posts to which they were attached.

A lone Eskoni farmhand, left to tend the herd through the night, was alerted by the commotion. He stalked down the side of the barn, carrying the thick wooden crook that was sometimes used to gently prod the beasts on the rump to encourage them to move.

He was no more than a boy, really. Staying awake all night was a young person's duty, his family had told him. Secretly they were all just glad to get a good night's sleep themselves.

The farmhand peered into the gloom of the pen where the mogoths were still growling and complaining. One or two of them were definitely distraught.

The earthquake must have upset them quite a lot – it had certainly given the boy a fright.

189

Then he thought he caught a glimpse of something moving in the straw, something slick and black.

One of the mogoths suddenly roared and stamped its feet, panicking the others and making the boy jump. In the lamplight he saw another glistening black lump on the creature's back. It suddenly reared up and then bit down savagely, causing the mogoth to cry out again.

With a shocking realisation, the farmhand saw that the black things were everywhere – they were clambering all over the mogoths, and squirming around in the straw at their feet. One of the closer ones lifted its dark snout from the flank of a mogoth and the farmhand found himself staring into a ring of vicious teeth red with blood.

The thing snapped forward with impossible speed and took the front

of the boy's head away with one ferocious bite.

'Doctor,' said Anavolus, his voice trying to reclaim some of its old authority, but not quite succeeding. He simply sounded like a frightened old man. 'What. . .

what are we to do?'

'According to Compassion, the infant Spulver worms were hatching right below the city foundations,' replied the Doctor. 'That puts us all in a very difficult position.'

'If they come into the city itself,' Compassion said, 'then they'll start at the bottom and work their way up.'

'And we're right at the top,' realised Fitz. 'Great.'

'That gives us some time, then,' said Brevus. 'To organise an effective defence.' –

'It doesn't give the people on the lower levels much time,' snapped the Doctor.

'But they are going to be the first to die,' Compassion noted. 'It's got to buy us some time.'

'Maybe they'll be full by the time they reach us,' hoped Fitz.

The Doctor shot him a scorching look. 'These things are newly born, Fitz.

They'll be very, very hungry. They won't get full, they'll just get bigger.'

'So why don't we all just pile into Compassion?' suggested Fitz.

'Not possible,' she responded. 'My internal structure is still realigning. Until the autorepair process is complete, my outer plasmic hull cannot be breached.'

'Besides which,' added the Doctor, 'there are more than just our lives at stake.'

'But we're sitting ducks up here,' Fitz pointed out. 'Trapped.'

'Surely we can't just wait here to die,' protested Brevus.

‘Never,’ said the Doctor. ‘They way I see it, Anavolus, you’ve got two options: either you try to get as many people as you can up here and attempt to hold 190

the things off, or you evacuate.’

Anavolus looked crestfallen. ‘Surely there must be some other way. Is it really that bad?’

‘I don’t know what the population of Baktan is, but Compassion counted over a million Spulver eggs. They hunt by temperature, and in this heat they’ll be driven into a feeding frenzy. Do I have to draw you a picture?’

Anavolus remained flustered. ‘What do you suggest?’

‘Evacuation,’ replied the Doctor. ‘Get as many people out of the city as you can.’

‘But. . . but. . . ’

‘If you gather everyone near the top of the city, you’re just making things easier for the slugs. They won’t stop until they’ve eaten every last Eskoni they can find.’

‘Wait a sec, Doctor,’ said Fitz. ‘Evacuate the whole of Baktan?’

‘As much as we can manage.’

‘But there’s only one way out, and that’s right at the bottom. Where the slugs are.’

‘I know. It just means we’ll have to act quickly.’

Galvanised by the clarity of the Doctor’s voice, Anavolus clapped his hands together and summoned several of his Forum messengers and staff. He began to pass them instructions on organising a massive and unprecedented evacuation of his city.

‘This is terrible,’ said the Doctor, running a hand through his hair. ‘So many people are going to die. It’s horrendous.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ said Fitz. ‘We can only do our best to minimise the casualties.’

‘What if the Eskoni don’t believe there’s a problem?’ asked Compassion.

‘They may not realise what’s happening down below until it’s too late.’

‘Anavolus and the other Forum members will have to go out personally and start spreading the word,’ said the Doctor.

‘That’s a pretty tall order.’

‘It’s all I can think of!’ The Doctor’s anger boiled over, and in the quietness that followed, Fitz realised someone was missing.

‘Hey. Where’s Tor Grymna?’

‘He’s gone,’ said Brevus. ‘I haven’t seen him since the earthquake.’

‘No, he was here after that,’ said Compassion. ‘He slipped out just a couple of minutes ago, though.’

‘We can’t worry about him now,’ complained the Doctor. ‘We have to help Anavolus and Krumm get things moving up here.’

* * *

191

Ckeho tried to straighten up a little when the door crashed open and his father strode in. Huddled inside his slime-soaked robes, Ckeho felt unaccountably cold and deathly. The earthquake had terrified him, leaving him trembling and unable to concentrate. The thought of the Squirming was never far away, and he hoped this wasn’t a sign of its onset.

Tor Grymna’s eyes glowed like coals beneath the dark and knotted brows.

For a moment he stood in the middle of the room without actually looking at his son. Then, he said, ‘Ckeho.’

The word sent a hum of pleasure through the slimer, and he felt a little warmer.

‘It’s time for you to leave,’ continued his father gruffly. ‘You can’t stay in Baktan any longer.’

‘Because of the earthquake?’

‘Among other things. The city is under attack by. . . alien spawn. . .

and you should go, now, while you still have a chance.’

Ckeho frowned with confusion. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘You don’t have to understand,’ barked Tor Grymna. He crossed to his desk and opened it, removing a number of pieces of equipment and a heavy cloak from the back of his chair. Ckeho did not fail to notice the handbow as his father concealed it under the robe.

‘Are you leaving too?’

‘My duty remains with the city of Baktan,’ responded Tor Grymna flatly.

‘Come with me.’

‘I cannot.’

‘Look at me!’ Ckeho stepped in front of his father. Tor Grymna let his burning gaze fall upon the dismal features of his son. ‘Tell me what it is you are planning.’

Tor Grymna sighed deeply. All my life, I have served Baktan. My grandfa-ther was a subcouncillor, as was my father. I was the first in my family to earn a place on the Forum. It is a privilege I hold very dear. For me, there has been no greater joy than helping to encourage and nurture this city. In recent times that has been a difficult task, I know – but still a worthwhile one.

‘Now it seems all my efforts have been for nothing. The mutations that have given rise to your. . . condition, and to the other slimers, are the result of a terrible accident. No one on Eskon could have known that.’ Tor Grymna reached out a hand and rested it gently against his son’s face. ‘I was wrong to expel the slimers. I was wrong to ignore their plight. I was wrong, very wrong, to try to destroy them.

‘But, Ckeho, the most wrong thing that I have ever done was to turn my back on you.’

192

Ckeho reached up and held his father’s large hand against his cheek, pressing it into the moist flesh. ‘Father. . . ’

‘I cannot repay you for the hurt that I have caused,’ Tor Grymna continued hoarsely. ‘But I can make amends for the suffering of

Baktan, and the insidious alien presence that has caused all our problems. I have always maintained that Eskon's only real problems are the result of alien interference. Now I can take the appropriate action.'

'I don't understand.'

'I can do no more now than rid our world of the alien infestation that has blighted our existence for so long.' Tor Grymna smiled and picked up his cloak and handbow. 'I could say that I am doing this for Baktan, or even Eskon itself, Ckeho. But actually, I am doing it for you.'

Fitz pelted down the thoroughfare that led from the Baktan governing offices to the hierarchy apartments. He wasn't going to let Tor Grymna go that easily; he should have expected the wily old stoat to try to slip off like that, ahead of everyone else. The thought made his skin crawl – all the more because there was a part of Fitz that recognised the desire to do just that himself. He had to push it down into the deepest recesses of his own mind, and let himself be caught up in the Doctor's wake once again. Fitz knew he was no hero – he left that stuff to the Doctor. But he'd be damned if he'd let Tor Grymna slide off like some kind of snake.

He reached the old Eskoni's apartment and burst in through the door without knocking or announcing himself.

Inside, Ckeho sat on the edge of his father's desk. The room was otherwise empty.

'Ckeho,' said Fitz, rather nonplussed. 'What are you still doing here?'

The slimer regarded him doubtfully. 'What does it matter to you? You left me here, remember.'

'Yeah, well, I wasn't thinking straight. Your dad had just walloped me, remember.'

Ckeho snorted.

'So. . . what, um, happened?'

'Nothing that you need to concern yourself with, now,' said Ckeho. 'But thanks anyway. I'm glad I came back, and that was down to you, mostly.'

Fitz couldn't work it out. 'So what's the deal? Are you two on speaking terms again?'

'Oh, yes. But I'll never see him again now.'

Fitz was about to ask why, when he felt a warm presence close by. He turned and found Florence standing behind him; she must have followed him here all the way from the Forum chamber. Suddenly everything had changed 193

again. He'd lost the impetus to find Tor Grymna, and there were other pressing matters. He couldn't bear the soft, docile look in the Eskoni girl's eyes any more, or Ckeho's pathetic self-loathing.

'Come on,' he said, 'we've got to get out of here.'

The spawn moved out of the farms when it became apparent that there was not enough livestock to feed them all. Just above the animal halls and the plantation steppes were the first of the Eskoni homes, mostly where the farm-ers lived with their families, and some of the lower-grade technicians and traders. The houses were carved from the solid rock, one on top of another and interconnected like an irregular honeycomb. It was night-time, and many Eskoni were sleeping in their beds when the slugs found them.

They slithered in through the open windows and doors, because none of the homeowners needed to lock and bar their residences in this close-knit community. Everyone knew each other, or was related to each other. The first they knew was when they heard the screams of their neighbours.

Some of the Eskoni townsfolk carried out their business in the slightly less warm hours of the night, aided by light from the moons. Those who returned home now found their living places overrun by hideous, crawling things slippery with blood.

The brave ones, or the more desperate ones, tried to save their families. It was already too late, however, and the slugs were fantastically quick. They could turn and strike like lightning, jaws snapping off arms or legs without warning.

Some of the Eskoni turned and ran. Those that made for the farms found them to be a vision from a nightmare. As far as the eye could see, there was a carpet of slithering, coiling slugs, glistening and malignant in the darkness.

They were welling up from the depths of the planet, unstoppable.

Anavolus stared out of the window of the Forum chamber for the last time.

He knew he would never see this view again. He was too old to survive this.

The great silver moon of Kankira had risen and now cast its baleful glare on Baktan. It knew what was coming. It could sense death.

‘Anavolus,’ said a voice behind him. The old Eskoni turned to find the Doctor standing in the middle of the chamber; apart from him the room was empty.

‘It’s time to go. Brevus and Compassion are waiting outside. Everyone else has left.’

Anavolus just smiled and turned back to the window.

The light from

Kankira, passing through the stained glass, turned his features green. ‘You can see it starting, from here,’ he said. ‘The people pouring out of the city.’

194

The Doctor joined him at the window and looked down. A pool of darkness was spreading out across the desert from the base of the city. In the cruel light of the moon, it looked like blood leaking from a fatal wound.

‘They’re spreading out into the slimers’ shantytown,’ noted Anavolus with dismay.

‘They’re not the monsters, Anavolus.’

‘No, of course not.’

A lone messenger stepped up behind them. ‘Sir, we’re just getting news from the lower city levels. The slugs came in via the farms. We think the livestock might have slowed them down.’

‘For the moment,’ said the Doctor quietly. ‘Come on, Anavolus, we have to be quick. It won’t be long before they start spreading through the city proper.’

There really isn't much time.'

'What's the point?' Anavolus waved a hand at the messenger. 'Off you go, boy.'

Relieved, the youth positively sprinted from the room. The Doctor watched him go with barely concealed envy. 'The point', he said icily, 'is that you are the leader of Baktan's ruling Forum. The people will need you for guidance and inspiration.'

'They've got Tor Grymna for that.'

'Don't be such an old fool, Anavolus! One way or another, this day marks a turning point in Baktan's history. Good or bad, this is the beginning of a new future for your people. Whether you live or die, be a part of it with them.'

Don't just give up.'

'You've a fine way with words, Doctor. And your eyes are always alive with the truth.' Anavolus picked up his walking stick and stood a little straighter.

'Well come on, then, what are we waiting for?'

Fitz led Ckeho and Florence out through the maze of passageways that formed the government and administration level of the city more by luck than judgement. Word had got round the offices and apartments for the high-ups pretty fast, as he might have expected. The area was already deserted, so they made good progress.

A couple of levels down, though, they came across Eskoni trying to leave.

Fitz had once heard it said that, when an office block or block of flats catches fire, anyone above the fourth storey is toast. The provision for escape –

whether it is fire stairs or simply jumping out of the window – is next to useless.

'This way,' he found himself saying, jerking Florence roughly back by the hand and heading away from the crowd of Eskoni blocking the entrance to the stairwell.

Ckeho shuffled quickly after them. ‘Are you sure?’

‘No point in hanging around with that lot,’ Fitz explained. ‘We might as well find another route.’

They were starting to run. The panic was nibbling away at the back of their minds, urging them on. Fitz paused by a window and craned his neck to look down, relieved to see so many people flooding out of the city. That meant there must be an escape route – several, probably, judging by the streams of ant-sized shapes pouring out in every direction. If only it didn’t get too congested. Or at least, too congested before they could get out themselves.

The people had gathered up what belongings they could carry and headed for the exits. No one could remember a time when this had happened. Rumours spread through the crowds like a plague of misinformation. Some people said there were alien invaders in the city, others said the animals were loose. Some even said they’d heard reports of giant slugs. Most people, however, believed the evacuation was the result of the earthquake. Everyone had found it quite terrifying, aware that they were effectively trapped in Baktan and stood no chance of survival if the quake was too severe.

But nobody liked to think about that much, and there wasn’t really time.

Whole families made their way down and out of the city through the sandcar garages and exits, carefully avoiding the farming quarter that had, apparently, suffered the worst of the disaster.

The children coped better than the adults did, if only because they couldn’t grasp the awesome implications of the exodus. Some of the younger cubs clung to their parents, picking up on their anxiety, but the older children ran around in the moonlight, enjoying the unexpected adventure. For the most part, the adults stayed quiet, remaining together in large family groups, simply hoping to weather the storm.

Once outside the city walls, the vast majority of the people of Baktan found that they were walking through the slimer shantytown – or, rather, what remained of it. In the moonlight they could see that it had been ravaged by fire, smell the cloying smoke and detritus. Some of them even felt pity for the little shapes huddled in rags by the side of the roads, crouching over blackened remains and sticks of flesh. No one had stopped to think what must have happened here, and now it

seemed surreal, set against their own plight. The little white eyes of the surviving slimers stared back at them with neither hate nor fear, just a desperate lack of any feeling at all. These creatures had been reduced to the lowest rung of the social ladder, and now they had been kicked right off it.

* * *

196

By an astounding stroke of luck, Fitz had stumbled upon an almost empty route down through the city. He took the stairs two at a time, although he kept having to wait for Florence and Ckeho to catch up. The girl kept stopping to help the slimer – something that Fitz only now realised was remarkable in itself. Ckeho, for his part, was doing the best his mutation would allow. Fitz felt a pang of shame, and tried to offer up some encouragement when they reached the next level.

‘Come on, you two, we’re doing fine. Not far now.’

They looked at him, knowing that there was still a long way to go.

‘Well, all right, but at least we’ve got this far this quickly,’ he added hurriedly.

‘I can’t go on much further,’ moaned Ckeho, halting and leaning against a pillar. His breath came in glottal rasps, and a succession of shivers ran through his frame. ‘I’m not built for speed.’

Fitz said, ‘We’re not leaving you here, Ckeho. We’ll carry you if we have to.’

It was as empty a promise as any other, but it seemed to rekindle some of the slimer’s determination. Fitz tried not to wonder what the kid hoped to live for. He just grabbed him by the elbow and pushed him forward. ‘Come on, we can rest up outside.’

He reached back and grasped Florence’s hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. She smiled weakly at him – she looked beat too. Only then did it strike Fitz that in all the time he had been on Eskon, he seemed to be the only person to have behaved like a friend to her. No wonder she wouldn’t let him out of her sight.

They turned the corner and stopped dead in their tracks, Fitz’s musings forgotten in one heart-stopping instant.

The steps led down to a short vestibule with a tiled floor and glass-panelled walls. Crawling across the tiles, leaving a wake of slime, was the biggest, ugliest slug Fitz had ever seen.

It was fully six feet long, half as wide at the centre. Its skin was a glistening grey-black. Its head had reared up, trailing goo, to show off a circular maw filled with razor spines. It was uncannily familiar, and it took a moment to realise why: many of the creature's most basic characteristics were mirrored in the more human faces of the slimers.

Ckeho, for instance. The kid was paralysed with fear, his little white eyes wide and staring as the slug thing gave a sudden hiss of anger. Its thick mucous saliva sprayed through the air, and a set of writhing tentacles leapt suddenly from its mouth.

'Back!' cried Fitz, throwing himself bodily at Ckeho. They fell together, the longest tentacle falling short of them by only a couple of feet. But Ckeho landed awkwardly at the top of the flight of stairs and slipped. Fitz made a grab for him but the slimer was overbalancing fast. He tumbled down the 197

steps, dragging Fitz with him, towards the Spulver. It hissed again, and, with a speed completely alien to the slugs Fitz knew on Earth, went for them like a rabid dog.

198

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Last Word

In a paroxysm of fear, Fitz Kreiner hit the last step and scrambled immediately to his feet. The slug's giant head was only inches away, its gaping jaw opening wide enough to bite off his head. Fitz had one terrifying look down the creature's sticky grey gullet before his autonomous reactions took over and he hurled himself away. The ring of teeth clamped shut on empty air, its spittle flying.

Fitz hadn't cared where he was throwing himself. He hit a wall heavily and slumped to the floor, stunned. With double vision he watched Ckeho scrambling to safety, the slug snapping after him in frustration.

As his eyesight came back to order, Fitz could still see two of the Spulver things. No, make that three.

Hell, the passageway was full of them.

How did they get up here so fast?

All these thoughts bounced down through his dazed brain before spinning to a rest in his subconscious. Then he realised the peril he was in, and tried to stand up. His legs were like jelly, though.

And the slug, the very annoyed one, was turning towards him, spitting and hissing, its mouth tentacles rippling.

Suddenly something dark and velvet-coated flew across his vision, shouting his name. The Doctor landed, skidded, nearly fell and then regained his balance. He grabbed Fitz by the lapels and hauled him upright, flinging him bodily back towards the stairs where Ckeho and Florence caught hold of him.

Fitz twisted to watch the Doctor confront the Spulvers. He'd landed by the tall glass partitions that separated the wall of the corridor from the amenity rooms beyond. With one backward kick, the Doctor smashed the glass with explosive force. Huge jagged shards cascaded to the floor and spun across the slippery tiles, like a carpet of transparent knives.

The Doctor had wound his handkerchief around one hand and was able to pick up one of the pieces of broken glass. It was the size of a short sword, and as the snarling Spulver unleashed its tentacles at him, the Doctor slashed at them with the glass. A couple were sliced right through, causing the beast 199

to writhe backwards, retracting the tentacles into its body. The severed tips coiled and uncoiled on the floor.

The Doctor hurled his piece of glass at the other slugs and then bounded back up the steps to rejoin Fitz and the others. The Spulvers couldn't advance over the mass of broken glass without at least incurring pain, if not terrible injury.

'Come on,' said the Doctor, grabbing Fitz by the elbow and steering him back the way he had come. 'We'll have to find another way down.'

'How'd they get up here so fast?' Fitz asked.

'I told you, they're not strictly slugs or worms,' explained the Doctor hurriedly. 'Stop thinking of them as ponderous garden pests only

interested in your prize lupins. These things have the speed and ferocity of pit bull terriers.'

'You're not kidding.'

Further down the corridor were Anavolus, Brevus and Compassion, waiting for them to catch up. They halted to rest for a moment, allowing Ckeho to get his breath back. 'Those. . . things. Are they what I'm going to become?'

'No,' said the Doctor.

'You're just stuck halfway,' added Compassion.

The Doctor gave her a hard stare. 'Never mind about that, Ckeho. You are who you are, that's all that matters.'

Ckeho's expression remained pained. 'But inside me. . . '

The Doctor fixed him with an electric-blue stare. 'Don't think about it, Ckeho.'

'Look, these things are going to be everywhere,' said Fitz. 'Are your insides sorted out yet, Compassion?'

She shook her head. 'Another hour at least.'

'We haven't time,' added Brevus. 'If the Spulvers have penetrated this far up the city, every route down could be compromised. We can't afford to wait.'

'Right,' agreed the Doctor. 'This is what we'll –'

Anavolus shrieked as something yanked him off his feet. The old Eskoni hit the floor and slid backwards, dragged by a tentacle wrapped around his legs.

The tentacles belonged to a Spulver crawling along the corridor wall behind them, shards of glass projecting from its glistening flank. With a triumphant wheeze, it pulled Anavolus closer and bit deeply into him.

'Anavolus!' cried the Doctor, charging back. The old Eskoni screamed as the slug tore into him, gnawing and tearing at his flesh.

Compassion held the Doctor back. 'There's nothing you can do,' she shouted over the screams. 'He's a dead man!'

Suddenly the terrible noise stopped as the jaws hit the old Eskoni's spinal column, and all they could hear was the sound of crunching bone and the 200

creature's snorting gulps. Anavolus's body jerked and twitched as the slug fed on it, joined moments later by two more.

'My God,' whispered Fitz.

'So fast,' said Brevus, dazed.

The Doctor stood and glared for a moment, anguish written in every line on his face. Then he shrugged himself free of Compassion's grip and turned his back on the monsters. 'Come on,' he said. 'This way.'

The Doctor led them without another word down three more levels before they found the wide-open square that had once been home to the water market.

Now it was a charnel house.

The stalls were all overturned or empty, standing like grey stone in the light of the giant moon of Kankira. It looked now for all the world like a graveyard. There were bodies, of course, and fragments of bodies. A corpse lay there, gutted and lying in a vast pool of blood. There was an arm here, a foot there. Some of the remains didn't bare closer examination. It was like walking through an abattoir.

There were Spulvers here, but they couldn't see them in the flat grey light.

They could hear them, though, eating through the easy meat, hidden beneath the upturned stalls and goods scattered across the blood-slicked pavement.

The Doctor stood and remembered his visit here only a couple of nights ago, when he had traded sweets and toys with the local children and stallholders.

'We're too late,' he said.

'No,' said Brevus. 'Thousands, *hundreds* of thousands, of people have already left the city. Not everyone could survive.'

'You still can,' said Compassion. It took a moment for Fitz to realise she was talking to all of them, exclusive of herself. She'd been doing

that a lot recently, and with a strange chill he found he knew why: what's there to worry about your own personal safety if you're indestructible? These slugs could break their teeth on her all day if they wanted to, and she wouldn't show a scratch.

And she could brain any one of them with her fist. It seemed an attractive proposition, until a further implication of her words struck home. If you can't be hurt or killed, it must be a bit like being already dead.

'Let's keep moving,' Brevus suggested.

The six of them moved on, trudging across the empty space of the market square towards the escalators that led down to the next level.

'Power's still on, then,' noted Fitz, as they trooped down the slowly moving staircase.

'They're interested in meat, not energy,' said the Doctor sharply.

201

They filed out at the bottom and made for the ramps that led down again. It felt uncannily chilly down here, an uncommon feeling in Baktan day or night.

As the light of Kankira faded behind them, the shadows grew larger. They quickened their pace, hurrying now, aware that not too far below them were the main city exits, and a chance of freedom and safety. Never before had Fitz looked forward to the oppressive warmth of the Eskon desert so much.

Compassion took the lead, intending to fight off any slugs that might try to bar their exit. Brevus and Ckeho followed, the Eskoni helping the slimer along. Fitz and Florence came next, walking and running alternately, while the Doctor brought up the rear. This part of the city looked to be deserted now, although occasionally they came across the grim remains of some poor Eskoni in the gloom. No one stopped to look any longer than it took to see that the unfortunate victim was dead, and in most cases that was evident at a glance.

It was still dark, although daybreak couldn't be all that far off now. Kankira's light was fading fast, taking its false dawn with it. In its place the shadows grew deeper, purple and black voids full of echoes and invisible things. The people who had lived on these levels had been asleep, and there was no arti-ficial lighting to relieve the

dimness.

They didn't see any Spulvers in this section, until it was too late.

They were running down a wide corridor full of statuettes and little alcoves full of Eskoni shrines. With a sudden jerk, Florence was pulled off her feet and hauled into the air.

'No!' cried Fitz, stopping as he felt her snatched literally from his grasp. His hand suddenly felt cold in the absence of her touch.

The girl was hanging over their heads, a multitude of white tentacles coiled around her body. She was being dragged up towards a massive slug hanging from the corridor ceiling, its mouth gaping and teeth dripping slime.

The Doctor leapt up and caught hold of Florence's leg. Fitz jumped and grabbed her hands again. For an absurd moment, they played tug o' war with the creature, the Eskoni girl's cries growing ever more desperate. Her hands gripped Fitz's so hard he felt his knuckles grinding. He hauled back with all his might, and for one sickening moment felt his feet leave the floor. The slug was winning!

'Compassion!' yelled the Doctor.

'She's gone ahead,' Fitz shouted back. 'Pull!'

The Doctor lost his grip on Florence's ankle as one of the Spulver's tentacles coiled itself tighter around the leg and snatched it free. Florence tipped forward, head down, and Fitz was able to switch hold with one hand and grab her wrist in a fireman's grip. Her fingers dug into the flesh of his forearm as she looked down straight into his eyes. Hers were wide and full of 202

uncomprehending terror.

She jerked upwards as the Spulver resumed its efforts. Her mouth opened, silently.

'Oh, God, no,' groaned Fitz as he felt her sliding out of his sweating hands.

Florence looked at him, and said, 'Fitz!'

Fitz blinked, and her hands slipped out of his. She shot upwards towards the slug.

‘ Fiiiiitzzz! ’

Fitz stared up, a single drop of blood landing on his cheek. He wanted to shout out her name, but he realised he didn’t even know it.

The Doctor pushed him back and away from the scene as fast as he could, before the blood really began to fall.

‘Where are the others?’ asked Compassion suddenly, coming to a halt. Brevus nearly collided with her.

Compassion turned and began to track back the way they had come. In their haste to leave the city, they had begun to spread out, which was often a mistake.

‘They’ll catch us up,’ said Brevus, eager to carry on. He thought he could smell the warm breath of the desert already, and he could definitely hear the murmur of the crowds outside the city. He just wished it were a little lighter down here.

‘Wait!’ said Compassion. ‘Keep still and be quiet.’

Brevus froze, hardly daring to breathe. Behind him he could hear the moist slither of a Spulver. He turned and saw its probing tentacles waving in the air, trying to sense who was the warmest – he, Compassion or Ckeho.

Without warning the slug lunged for Brevus, but collided with Compassion.

Its tentacles wrapped around her arms like whips, but she was too strong for it. She leaned forward, gripped the nest of writhing tentacles and twisted hard. The slug hissed furiously and squirmed away.

‘Compassion!’ gasped Ckeho. ‘There’s more!’

Two Spulvers crawled forward, spitting and gnashing, their hides glimmering in the faint light. Behind them were several more, all moving towards their prey. As if sensing that Compassion was a threat, they appeared to hesitate. But then a bunch of tentacles dropped from the ceiling and wrapped themselves around Ckeho, lifting him from his feet. With an oath, Compassion glanced up. There were more Spulvers, clinging to the ceiling.

She wrenched Ckeho free of the slug’s awkward grasp, just as two

more set upon her from behind. The others surged in for the kill.

Suddenly a ball of fire erupted from nowhere and engulfed Compassion. The flames spewed across the Spulvers and they fell back with angry 203

snarls. The flames flickered upwards and singed the ceiling with a concussive *whoosh* before disappearing into the air. Compassion was left untouched.

She turned to see the Doctor rushing towards her, a look of grim determination on his face and a hip flask in one hand.

As she watched, he tipped the hip flask's contents over the nearest Spulver and then flicked open Fitz's Zippo cigarette lighter. The Grekolian whisky ignited brightly and enveloped the slug in a cloud of fire. It squealed and reared away, tentacles waving madly. The whisky was running down its throat, trailing flame.

The nearest tapestries were sprayed with the fluid, immediately catching fire. The flames roared hungrily and began to eat their way up towards the ceiling.

'Come on,' shouted the Doctor, 'before this whole place goes up in smoke!'

He jumped nimbly over the smouldering carpet and helped Ckeho through.

Compassion saw Brevus helping Fitz along, one arm around his shoulders. He looked shocked and withdrawn. There was no sign of his Eskoni girlfriend.

'Bad accident back there,' explained the Doctor in answer to her questioning glance. He had paused to stuff his handkerchief down the narrow neck of the hip flask. He left a long piece trailing from the top and then set fire to it with the Zippo. 'We tried to save her, but it was too late.'

Compassion nodded her understanding, but decided there was no point in saying anything. She looked to see that Brevus had taken Fitz well clear before the Doctor hurled the flask like a hand grenade back down the corridor.

It bounced a couple of times, trailing fire, before landing in the midst of the pursuing slugs and exploding. Orange fire belched across the

passageway and ignited the remaining tapestries. Before long they could hear the distinct sizzling of Spulver flesh as they flailed around in the inferno.

The heat drove them on, faster than ever, flames crackling and rushing through the city.

Outside Baktan, the people had taken over the desert. They were spread out in long lines and huge irregular crowds. As more and more people emerged from the city, those who had been first to leave had to move out further into the desert. Before long the sand was black with Eskoni and slimers, and a mist of orange dust had been thrown up by their passage.

The Doctor and his friends emerged into this confused throng, themselves bewildered and frightened. Fitz stumbled along without speaking, no longer supported by Brevus, no longer apparently caring where the others were. In effect, Brevus, Ckeho and Compassion followed Fitz, allowing him to lead them randomly in any direction that took them away from the city behind them.

204

The Doctor followed them all, trudging through the charred remains of the slimer shantytown, head up and full of renewed purpose and energy. All around him were the lost people of a community that, despite its faults, didn't deserve this. Everywhere he looked he saw wide, scared eyes and people holding on to each other for comfort and protection. Ahead, the people all merged into one enormous crowd, and clumps of crowds, disappearing into little patches of darkness on the sand as far as the eyes could see. An exodus.

Those farthest away must have trudged a mile, a mile and a half, to get to where they felt they could safely stop.

The Doctor quickened his pace and caught up with Compassion, tapping her urgently on the shoulder. 'It's not over yet,' he told her.

'I know,' she replied. She didn't look tired or sickened or even frightened, but there was something in place of her usual bored sarcasm, some kind of spark of – what? Obligation? The Doctor shook his head; he would probably never know, and now wasn't the time to find out. Just press home the advantage.

'What do you want me to do?' she asked plainly.

‘Tell you in a mo,’ he replied, and jogged on towards Brevus and Ckeho. He clapped them both on the back as he strode between them. ‘You two all right?’

They nodded solemnly. ‘What will happen, Doctor? To Baktan?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said truthfully. ‘We’ll find out soon enough, though. Just try to get everybody back as far as you can, away from the city. If the Spulvers start to feel the heat of the population gathered out here, they’ll come out of Baktan after them.’

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Ckeho.

‘I don’t know that yet, either.’

They came across a small group of Eskoni officials escorting a bent old figure who could barely walk. His halo of grizzled fur floated around his head in the starlight.

‘Krumm!’ exclaimed the Doctor. ‘I’m so glad you made it!’

‘I haven’t walked this far in fifty years, Doctor,’ cackled the old Eskoni. ‘It’d better be worth it.’

‘I hope so,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m afraid Anavolus didn’t make it.’

Old Krumm stopped. ‘Oh. I see.’

‘He insisted on staying right to the end.’

‘He would, the daft fool.’ Old Krumm sucked at his teeth for a moment, considering the implications. ‘What about Tor Grymna?’

‘I don’t know where he is,’ confessed the Doctor. ‘He could be dead as well.’

That would leave everything in your hands, wouldn’t it?’

‘I’m too old for that kind of bother now,’ he wheezed. ‘I’m done for.’

205

‘Rubbish. Get your people together, because one way or another, everything’s decided tonight. By the morning, the people of Baktan will face a brand-new destiny.’

Old Krumm grunted. ‘Stirring stuff. Anavolus told you that, did he?’

‘Sort of.’ The Doctor smiled. ‘Do it for him.’

Old Krumm fixed him with a beady stare. ‘I’ll see what can be done, Doctor.’

‘That’s the spirit! I’ll see what I can do at my end.’

‘Which is?’

‘Where the monsters are.’

When Brevus, Ckeho and Fitz had reached what they considered to be a safe distance, they sat down and watched Baktan in the starlight. Its pillars and coronets were brought into sharp relief by the shimmering light of the huge swathes of distant stars above, and, if you looked very carefully, you could see what was wrong.

There were things crawling all over the city. Tiny from this distance, like insects, but in some ways that made it worse. Because that was when you realised the numbers involved: those large patches of squirming blackness were in fact innumerable Spulver slugs emerging from the windows and balconies of Baktan *en masse*.

‘It’s disgusting,’ said Brevus. ‘Like some kind of infestation.’

‘That’s what I thought,’ commented Fitz quietly, ‘when I saw all these people from up there.’ He pointed to the top of the city. ‘Funny, isn’t it?’

The Doctor walked up and crouched down besides Fitz. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

Fitz clammed up when he was in trouble, and the Doctor knew he wouldn’t get much further. Drawing a deep breath, he pushed on regardless. ‘Compassion and I are going to get rid of the parent Spulver worm. Want to come?’

Fitz shook his head. He’d seen enough horror for tonight.

‘Look,’ said the Doctor quietly. ‘I know you think these people aren’t worth saving, but. . .’

‘It’s not that,’ argued Fitz. It’s just. . . it’s so unfair. That girl. . . no one cared about her, not even enough to give her a name, for Pete’s sake. All because she had no family. She was just a slave. You don’t agree with slavery, do you, Doctor?’

‘Of course I don’t. I’m not very impressed with a lot of things about these people, to be honest. The abuse of the slimers is a perfect case in point.

But that time is over, now. Whatever else happens tonight, things will be very different tomorrow. And tonight they definitely need our help. If they’re going to have a future, now’s the time to put things right. Or at least improve them.’

Fitz sniffed. ‘I thought you were off to fight the monster.’

206

‘Oh, I am. That’s the easy part. I thought you could start putting things right here.’ And with that, the Doctor stood up and walked away.

207

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ice Breaker

In the eerie light of the distant galaxy above, the city of Baktan could be seen quite clearly in the hours before dawn. It stood, vast and magnificent, dying the slow agonised death of a fatally wounded behemoth.

Brevus could see the Spulvers from here, swarming over the surface of the city, emerging from the windows and balconies like maggots in a corpse.

There could be no one left alive in there now. Everyone had moved out and gathered in the desert to watch the city being eaten alive. Near the base of the towering edifice he could see the first flickers of yellow as the Doctor’s fire took hold. It might spread some way through a few of the city levels, but not far enough to destroy all the Spulvers, not far enough to cleanse the city of its infection.

He shook his head sadly.

All around him, people were watching the
strangely silent spectacle in confusion and anger.

He couldn’t see the Doctor anywhere, or Compassion.

But he did spot Fitz, talking to a slimer. What was his name? Ckeho.

Brevus frowned. What was there to talk about now? Intrigued, he wandered over.

Compassion ran.

Behind her, a huge cloud of sand rose like a cloak of shimmering orange fire. Baktan city had disappeared in its haze, and ahead, standing like a pin in the starlight, was the ice mine.

She pushed on, faster and faster, ploughing through the vermilion dunes, kicking up a spray of sand like a ship through water.

She started to slow down about a kilometre and a half from the ice mine, and within a few seconds had skidded to a halt. She opened like a tall, coppery flower and let the Doctor out. With a huge grin, he bounded on to the concrete apron that surrounded the mine. 'Are we here already?'

'You know we are,' said Compassion. She never enjoyed the Doctor's more obvious attempts to appear human, or, more accurately, British. His habit of understatement only irritated her.

'Glad to see you're all shipshape again, anyway,' said the Doctor.

209

'Where are the thermium bombs stored?' Compassion asked brusquely, marching in through the entrance.

The Doctor jogged after her. 'Good question – although, strictly speaking, they're not really bombs of course.'

Inside, Compassion began scanning the control stations for information.

'They're just bog-standard thermionic devices when all's said and done,'

wittered the Doctor. 'They can be set to operate on different frequencies, though, using an inbuilt modulation circuit. That means you can –'

'Set them to gradual energy discharge or instant vaporisation,' finished Compassion. 'I know. I used to sell a military variant. Here they are.' She pointed to a schematic diagram of the ice mine that had fizzed into life on one of the station console screens. 'The slimer

sabotage wasted the mine's generator, but I've managed to –'

'Plug in your own power supply,' finished the Doctor, glancing over her shoulder. 'Not bad. I used to carry a pair of jump leads for K9.'

Compassion gave him a filthy look, and he was barely able to hide a sly smile. 'Come on, then. What are you waiting for?' He strode purposefully away towards the interior doors.

The damage was more evident through here, with walls scorched and buck-led by the thermium backblast. The generator room was a mess of tangled metal and plastic, but the storeroom further along the rock passage was untouched. The door was locked, however, and fused without any power to operate it. The Doctor reached into a pocket for his sonic screwdriver, but

'Not every occasion, no. That's the whole point.' They began to work their way along the edge of the massive ice canyon towards the bridge. 'Sometimes you just have to busk it.'

'Must be nice, having a life.'

The Doctor stopped. 'I'm sorry, Compassion, I thought you just said –'

'I did.' She was staring down into the blackness of the chasm at their feet, but she was seeing more than just an empty void. Or perhaps that was exactly what she was seeing. Down there, in the depthless dark, lay the remains of Zela, the Custodian who had fallen to his death from the ice bridge. For the first time the Doctor had an inkling of what might be troubling her.

'It wasn't your fault he died,' he said cautiously.

'I know that. I did try to save him. I'm indestructible, though, and he wasn't.

Where's the philosophy in that?'

The Doctor said nothing.

'I can never die, Doctor. But it feels like I'm dead already.'

'Poppyclock. You're unique, that's all. There are plenty of indestructible beings all around the cosmos. Ten a penny. Most of them live for ever, too, nearly. Your biggest problem will be boredom.'

The Doctor's voice echoed 210

hollowly around the cavern as he stopped talking. ‘Of course, I’ve developed a rather neat little philosophy of my own to avoid that sort of thing.’

‘Oh yeah? And what’s that?’

‘Keep on going to different places and different times, and meet different people. There’s no limit to them in this universe. No limit at all.’

For a minute Compassion seemed to consider this with some thought. Then she shrugged and said, ‘OK. Let’s get on with this first, though.’

‘I would,’ said the Doctor, ‘but we appear to have a slight problem. The ice bridge has gone.’

There was just a jagged spar of ice glinting like a crystal dagger as it jutted from the rock into the darkness. The other side of the cavern was faintly visible in the gloom.

‘Must’ve been smashed when the bombs went off,’ supposed Compassion.

‘Yes, or the earthquake did for it.’

‘Either way it’s the end of the line for you,’ noted Compassion. ‘I can jump it.’

The Doctor’s eyes twinkled like ice in the gloom. ‘Then jump it with me.

Come on!’ Then he leapt nimbly up on to her back, so that she had to catch him piggyback style.

‘Doctor, this is insane! If I miss my jump –’

‘You won’t!’

‘But I can carry you across inside me now. . . .’

‘Jump!’

Such was the fierceness of his exhortation that Compassion simply turned and leapt into the darkness. For a long second there was the dark void all around them, both sides of the crevasse invisible in the shadows. All that could be heard was the icy wind of her progress through the emptiness.

Then she hit the other side, flinty bits of rock scattering under her feet.

The Doctor let out a whoop of exhilaration and dropped down next to her.

‘Fantastic!’

‘Doctor, you could have been killed,’ she snapped.

‘Haven’t you got it yet, Compassion? I’m indestructible too!’

He turned and ducked into the crevice that led into the Spulver worm’s cavern, leaving her to follow, shaking her head. ‘No you’re not,’ she said quietly.

Inside the massive cavern, Compassion put a torch into the Doctor’s outstretched hand. Its powerful beam traced the length of the Spulver worm as it clung to the roof of the cave. The skin of the thing had taken on a greyer hue than before, and the sickly smell was even worse. The tentacles, some as thick as a man and fifty metres long, swayed listlessly.

‘Looks almost dead,’ remarked Compassion.

211

‘It’s certainly on its last legs,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘Or foot. Or whatever it uses to keep a grip on the ceiling.’

The tentacles began to twitch, probing weakly at the air.

‘It’s sensed us,’ whispered the Doctor.

‘It’s sensed *you*,’ Compassion corrected him. ‘I’ve dropped my outer-plasmic-shell temperature down to below zero.’

‘Oh, thanks a bunch.’

‘You’re welcome.’

We’d better get on with it. The sooner this thing’s gone the better.’

Compassion removed the thermium devices from inside her. ‘I thought you wanted to save it – give it a chance for life, or some such altruistic garbage.’

The Doctor pulled a face. 'Look at it. It's dying. If it falls off and lands on the ice field, its decaying corpse will only provide more contamination.'

'Unlikely. It'll be well preserved in these temperatures. Decomposition will almost certainly be avoided.'

'You're forgetting it's already wounded. Its own body warmth will provide enough for putrefaction to take place, even here. Either way we can't risk it.'

It's got to go.'

Compassion frowned. 'Tut I can't see the Eskoni getting this mine up and running again very soon.'

'Do you want to sit here and argue about it all night?' snapped the Doctor.

He thrust several of the thermium devices into her hands. 'You can do the iceberg.'

Compassion took the bombs, looking at him rather oddly. 'You're up to something.'

His expression hardened. 'Let's jump to it, eh? I want to be back in time for breakfast, if you don't mind.'

Compassion left without saying another word, immersing herself in the task of planting the thermium devices in the appropriate places around the enormous slab of ice suspended half in and half out of the cavern. It was almost a glacier.

She part climbed, part jumped to the most advantageous positions and set the devices deep into the frozen mass. The detonators were adjusted to decelerate the structural-bond energy release, producing a chain reaction through the ice's molecular structure to convert it into plain water. The speed of the effect was exponential and therefore inclined to be dramatic. One moment solid ice, the next moment a whole lot of very cold water.

She thought the Doctor's plan to literally flush the Spulver worm out of the ice reservoir system was just about mad enough to work. He always maintained that the simplest solutions were the best, and you couldn't get much simpler than this.

But there was something nagging at her subconscious. Something about the Doctor's whole demeanour. There was more to this than met the eye, something that often turned out to be the case with the Doctor.

She just couldn't think what.

The Doctor wanted to set some of the thermium charges off beneath the main iceberg, right down on the ground. Finding the right cracks and crevices in which to place the things proved to be more of a problem than he had anticipated, however. He didn't want to delay matters for too long, though.

He was, as usual, up against the clock. Which is exactly how it should be for a Time Lord, he reflected.

To make matters worse, the Spulver worm was definitely stirring. Its tentacles were waving slowly around in the darkness, trying to pick up on the tiniest heat source. The Doctor was uncomfortably aware of his hearts beating away in his chest, driving the blood through his body with enough energy to produce an easily recognisable heat trace.

As he clambered over the next stalagmite he nearly dropped the thermium bombs in shock.

Standing in the darkness was a tall, grey figure staring at him. 'Tor Grymna!'

said the Doctor, quite startled. 'Fancy meeting you here!'

'Get out of my way, Doctor,' growled the Eskoni. He brandished a loaded handbow from under his thick cloak.

'What are you doing here?' the Doctor demanded incredulously 'You're in terrible danger.'

'I've come to destroy that monster,' Tor Grymna said, jerking the handbow up towards the gloom overhead.

'You can't.'

'I've come prepared,' explained the Eskoni. In his free hand he held a thermium charge. The little LED on its timer mechanism showed that it was primed.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ countered the Doctor. ‘You won’t touch it with that thing!’

‘I know how to operate these devices, Doctor. This one is set for maximum energy dispersal.’

‘Tor Grymna, the Spulver worm has survived down here for decades in awful conditions and despite terrible wounds. That bomb is not going to faze it.’ The Doctor tried to force a degree of calmness into his voice. He straightened up slowly, and very carefully stepped down so that he was level with Tor Grymna. ‘Besides which, if you detonate that thing in the wrong place, you’ll bring the whole ice reservoir down on us.’

213

‘I’m going to destroy that thing, Doctor. I owe it to the people of Baktan.

You don’t owe us anything!’

Now you’re getting yourself all worked up,’ said the Doctor soothingly.

‘Compassion and I are here to deal with it now. Why don’t you just give me the thermium device and –’

‘Keep back!’ Tor Grymna prodded at the Doctor with the handbow. The tip of the bolt glinted in the lamplight, aimed squarely at his chest.

The Doctor froze, recognising the murderous gleam in the Eskoni’s dark eyes. ‘All right, all right.’

‘No one invited you to Eskon,’ stated Tor Grymna, raising the weapon. ‘None of this would have happened if you hadn’t come here.’

‘Not true,’ replied the Doctor calmly. ‘Revan and his people were ready to turn at any moment. His plans were well under way before I arrived. And if I hadn’t, then no one would have found out about the Spulver worm or the contaminated ice. Or its spawn. The people of Baktan would have been completely wiped out – Eskoni and slimers alike.’

‘So you say,’ sneered Tor Grymna. ‘But aliens only ever bring trouble. I had everything under control before you arrived.’

‘Really? Did Anavolus think you had everything under control? He’s dead, by the way. Eaten alive by the Spulver worm’s spawn. Sorry, did that shock you?’ The Doctor took a step closer, but Tor Grymna’s finger tightened on the handbow’s trigger. Slowly the Doctor raised his hands. ‘You couldn’t miss from there, Tor Grymna. Or may I call you Grymna? Never could stand all that formality claptrap.’

‘You insult every Eskoni with your alien barbarity!’

‘That’s rich, coming from the man who ordered the culling of an entire species yesterday morning. What stopped you from going all the way? Ckeho?’ The Doctor’s eyes narrowed. ‘Nice lad, by the way.’

‘Leave my son’s name out of this, you motherless alien interloper.’

‘Listen, we can stand around here swapping insults all night, but there simply isn’t the time. I have to act quickly. The Spulver worm is hunting for us as we speak.’

‘I hope it finds me,’ said Tor Grymna.

The Doctor sighed. ‘Can I make myself any clearer, Tor Grymna? Either shoot me and get it over with, or let me do what has to be done.’

For a split second, it almost looked as though Tor Grymna was considering the option. But then it was too late.

‘Look out!’ The Doctor suddenly charged the Eskoni down, knocking him flat. A massive tentacle lashed the air overhead, groping around the rocks for either one of them.

‘That was close!’ gasped the Doctor.

214

Tor Grymna punched out and sent the Doctor sprawling backwards. He landed with a heavy thump against a stalagmite. Automatically the Doctor checked above them for another sweep of the Spulver worm’s tentacles, but Tor Grymna took the opportunity to launch another attack. He was still a powerful man despite his age, and his first blow stunned the Doctor, dropping him to his knees. The Eskoni grabbed a handful of the Doctor’s long brown hair and pulled brutally backwards. He then pressed the tip of the handbow bolt against the exposed flesh of his throat.

‘One false move, Doctor, and you’ll never make yourself clear again.’ Tor Grymna’s breath was hot in the Time Lord’s ear. The Doctor’s eyes, creased in pain, focused on the roof of the cave overhead. Somewhere above that, Compassion was still busy planting the thermium devices. Where the heck was she when you really needed her? The Spulver worm was still there too, of course, searching and testing the air for their heat traces. It wouldn’t take it long now, not now they each had their blood up.

Suddenly the Doctor’s eyes widened in fear.

‘I’m not falling for that old trick,’ snarled Tor Grymna, kneeling him in the small of the back. The Doctor twisted with an agonised grunt. Tor Grymna, still with a fistful of the Doctor’s hair, overbalanced slightly. The Doctor wrenched himself free just as the Eskoni pulled the handbow trigger. He heard the bolt ricochet off the rocks and then heaved with all his strength.

They both fell to the ground.

I’ve done nothing but get into fights since I arrived on this planet, thought the Doctor.

There was a time when he might have enjoyed it, almost relished the violent exercise. But people seldom seemed to fight fair any more. Tor Grymna pushed the Doctor bodily away and hurled him against the rock. He landed awkwardly, winded, and just managed to roll out of the way of a slashing kick. Automatically the Doctor caught the foot, twisted the ankle, and sent the Eskoni flying.

For a moment the Doctor had a clear view of a strange metallic object lying on the rocky floor between them: the thermium device. Its little red light shone cheerfully in the semidarkness. The Doctor scooped it up, his fingers scrabbling at the controls. In that split second he knew he had only one option left. He twisted the setting dial, and then tossed the device lightly towards Tor Grymna.

Who caught it by reflex.

There was a long, expectant pause.

But nothing happened.

‘Ha!’ spat the Eskoni. ‘You’ve changed it to the wrong setting.’

‘No,’ said the Doctor, ‘I haven’t.’

The little cylinder suddenly emitted a piercing hum and started to glow bright red. Tor Grymna looked down in horror as the coruscating warmth spread out from the bomb and enveloped him in its scarlet embrace. The Doctor had adjusted the device to begin its detonation slowly. The chain reaction would build exponentially.

But first Tor Grymna would heat up like a lantern.

And then the Spulver worm would detect him all too easily.

The tentacles lashed down, desperate and hungry, and coiled themselves around the glowing figure. With a fiery scream Tor Grymna was lifted high into the air and transferred into the Spulver worm's impatient maw.

The Doctor saw it all very clearly. The whole scene was lit by Tor Grymna's burning effulgence. The circular mouth opened, drooling slime, and the Eskoni disappeared inside. Briefly, the interior of the black orifice was illuminated like the entrance to hell.

Then the light was extinguished.

'*Bon appétit*,' murmured the Doctor.

Somewhere deep inside the Spulver worm, the thermium device reached its maximum energy-release threshold. There was a rumble of far-off thunder, and then a massive shockwave as the creature was blown up from inside. It seemed to turn inside out, offering a moment's glimpse of its massive internal organs bursting through its mantle before a bright flower of orange light opened up at the centre of the ravaged flesh. For a second it burned like a tiny, venomous sun and then expanded into a frying cloud of red-hot gas.

Fragments of incinerating meat cascaded from the roof of the cave in a shower of viscera.

The Doctor, utterly exhausted, crouched under the lee of the nearest rock and waited for the debris to stop falling.

Before the last echoes of the Spulver worm's destruction had died, however, there was another ominous rumble. This was like the sound of distant hooves, the sound of a stampede of a thousand horses coming his way. The ground was starting to shake. And above him he could hear the agonising crack of breaking ice.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

It Never Rains. . .

Compassion was clinging on to the iceberg as it started to fall. Slowly at first, with huge juddering movements, the ice began to splinter and crack, shards leaping into the air like shrapnel.

There was little she could do but ride it. The berg began to shudder and craze beneath her. She had one thermium bomb left to plant; the others were all embedded. But now it looked as though the ice was going to break up before she could activate any of them.

‘Compassion!’ the Doctor roared, realising what was happening. He scrambled out from the rock and stared up into the darkness. He could feel the change in air pressure that heralded the massive shifting of the ice reservoir above. There were more cracks, deafeningly loud this time, the noise of granite in terrible pain.

Thousands, millions, of tons of ice on the move. The whole cave system was trembling with its ponderous slide.

He was barely able to stay upright. He clung on to a stalagmite for support, and felt the first chips and slivers of ice hitting his face like hailstones.

‘Compassion!’ he bellowed. ‘Detonate the therm—’

The final words were drowned by a rending crack of doom as the immense weight of ice split in two. Fragments of ice rained down like hundreds of glittering knives and the Doctor curled into a defensive ball.

Compassion heard, or thought she heard, the Doctor’s voice. Or maybe it was just in her head. Some part of her was now faintly telepathic, and the Doctor’s extrasensory powers were a matter of record.

Either way, she knew what she had to do.

The thermium device in her hand, the last one, contained the master control. When this one was detonated, all the others planted in the ice reservoir would follow.

There was no time to set the timer. As the mountain of crystallised

water broke up beneath her, Compassion activated the device in her hand. It went off immediately, with a terrific force like a slow-motion explosion. A second later, the remaining bombs followed suit. A chain reaction sped through the 217

crystalline lattice of the ice, converting the molecular structure to that of water at an ever-increasing rate.

With an almighty roar, the solid block of ice turned into a vast lake. It fell through the cavern in a raging torrent, filling it, choking it, snapping off stalagmites and rocks with the casual power of huge, unstoppable mass.

Compassion fell after it, a tiny speck in a small underground sea, turned upside down and sideways with incredible speed. Completely immersed, she allowed herself to be carried along with its enormous pressure.

And wondered what would happen to the Doctor.

They felt the tremors near Baktan.

The ground shook, once, and then again, with evil intent. The crowd of people gathered in the desert at once fell silent. Husbands and wives hugged each other, pulling their children closer. Friends and neighbours looked at one another.

The ground continued to vibrate beneath their feet. Many wanted to run, but they couldn't. They were paralysed with fear. Others simply slumped into the sand, trying to hold on to everything that they assumed was solid.

The vibration grew into a shake, then a shudder.

And then the whole desert convulsed.

The crowd let out a combined shout of fear and shock, a collective gasp that could be heard over the rumble of the oncoming earthquake.

Finally, it hit.

Something shifted deep beneath the ground, deep enough to cause the whole landscape to move. Suddenly, hundreds of thousands of people were reduced to the insignificant, as the entire desert drifted like an island cut loose in the ocean.

A cloud of sand was billowing up from the base of the city.

Many people saw it at once, but those around Fitz Kreiner heard him shout, above the din, 'Look! It's Baktan! It's going to bloody go!'

A continuous and overpowering peal of thunder came first. Then, at first almost too slowly to appreciate, the gigantic monolith of Baktan city began to fall. Dust erupted from its base as the honeycombed structure began to give way. It listed gracefully to one side as the ground beneath its natural foundations simply disappeared.

Before long the city clung to edge of a new precipice, a vast canyon opening up across the desolate landscape. The ground was giving way, subsiding, and as more and more chunks of the desert fell into the ever-widening chasm, Baktan tilted further. Slowly a huge, jagged crack split the city in half. Masonry and sandstone exploded through its empty hallways and passages; rooms, 218

homes, shops, schools and offices were flattened one by one as level upon level collapsed under the strain.

The crowd watched it topple in numbed awe. The mighty citadel seemed to pause at a ludicrous angle, as if in final farewell, two halves disintegrating as they watched, crumbling into smaller and smaller sections as the rock simply broke apart.

The Doctor decided that it was pointless trying to brace himself against the impact of the water. When it came, it struck so hard that he actually didn't feel it. He gave himself to the sudden sensation of being swept into the air, but air that he couldn't breathe.

For a long, long minute he was tossed and whirled through the freezing current. By a miracle he avoided being dashed against the rock. Like an ant being washed away by a bucket of water, however, he was carried along by the torrent in astounding safety.

When his head finally broke through the surface, he only had time to grab a single breath before he hit something hard. The breath was knocked out of his chest with a *whumph*, rendered inaudible by the roaring white noise of the water. Almost by instinct he grabbed hold of the rocky outcrop, the skin on his fingers scratched and torn as the current tried to claw him back. Kicking furiously, he scrambled up and away from the tumult, spitting out water and blood. Once he had heaved himself out of reach of the flood, he turned on to his back and lay there like a drowned rat, panting and coughing.

‘Indestructible,’ he gasped, pushing his drenched hair back over his head.

‘Reminds me too much of “unsinkable”.’

The water foamed and pounded past the little ledge of stone he had found, stinging him with a freezing spray. Somehow the water was finding its way deeper into the cave system, dragged down with the inevitable force of gravity.

But it had to stop at some point. And then, robbed of its massive forward momentum, it would surge back up into this cave like a tidal wave.

Cautiously the Doctor explored the area around him, clambering on his hands and knees along the ledge. Twice he almost slipped into the raging froth beside him. The ledge petered out in a sharp little spar of rock, some three metres from a granite pillar that had once been a huge stalagmite until the tip had been unceremoniously snapped off.

It was too far to jump. He didn’t have enough room to move into any kind of position for jumping. If he missed, he would plunge into the water and drown.

Then the ground beneath his hands and knees began to tremble, at first only slightly, but then with gathering force. The sudden removal of such a vast iceberg was bound to cause subsidence as the ground above it, once held up 219

by its sheer bulk, found the effort of staying suspended over nothing too much to bear. Even as he watched, great lumps of rock and soil were beginning to drop down into the water with huge splashes. Some of the bigger chunks hit the water like depth charges, sending gouts of liquid some twenty metres in the air. The roof of the cave was going to collapse, and very soon.

And the Doctor was completely trapped.

The people of Baktan watched their city die in stunned silence. Eskoni and slimer alike stood side by side, their attention riveted on the incredible scene of destruction. The devastation was too great to comprehend, but one thing was clear to every single person who witnessed it: that in that great citadel, and covering half its exterior, were countless monsters intent on killing every single living creature that had lived inside it. They had wanted to gorge themselves on the flesh of the innocent, and now they were going to pay the ultimate

price.

There was a cost, too, for the people; but it was one that most were prepared to pay. The others had already lost their lives to the Spulver worm's horrid spawn.

The shaking of the ground was continuous, and as the great city of Baktan began its final slide into the dust, something awful – and wondrous –

happened to make the earthquake seem a commonplace inconvenience.

Something caught the Doctor's eye as he racked his brain for a way out. Something small and dark that was being swept along with the angry river of ice water before him, something with arms and legs and coppery hair. It smashed into the giant stalagmite stump with enough force to crack a piece of the thing off. The fragment hit the torrent and disappeared with a throaty splash.

'Compassion!' yelled the Doctor.

Compassion clung to the rock like a crumb lodged in a broken tooth. The Doctor saw her twist around, flicking the water from her face, searching for the source of his voice.

'Over here!'

She saw him then. Looked straight at him. Their eyes locked.

The Doctor held out his hand. 'Compassion!' he urged.

But she was too far away to touch, even if she had let go of the stalagmite with one hand and reached out to him.

Then a thought struck the Doctor right between the eyes: if she wanted to, she could just dematerialise now. She wouldn't know where she'd end up, but she'd be away from here.

She was clinging to the rock, pummelled by the passage of the water, staring at him. And he knew she was thinking the same thing.

220

He kept his hand outstretched.

Then, with a terrific splintering crunch, the stalagmite finally gave in

to the pressure of the water and started to topple.

And then the lake slowed its forward motion. Slowed, and began to reverse.

The quaking rock beneath him started to crack and fragment as the huge mass surged back, screaming like an enraged elemental force.

Compassion disappeared into the foam, still holding on to the broken stalagmite.

The last thing the Doctor saw was her dark-red hair disappearing into the raging whiteness.

And then the water hit him and plucked him from the disintegrating shelf like a leaf driven by the wind.

The noise was indescribable, although later Fitz would try to compare it to that of an erupting volcano.

With a blast that sent a shockwave of concussion right through the ground they lay on, the desert exploded behind the toppling remains of Baktan.

A tower of muddy orange sand shot into the air with immense force, and behind it came a column of purest white, punching its way out of the ground that had been left fatally weakened by the earthquake.

The whiteness rose slowly into the morning air, catching the first rays of Eskon's proud sun like a signal flare. Then the roaring noise followed it, the sound of a hundred thousand screams. A huge cloud of steam billowed into the sky like a vast white flag rippling in the wind.

And then it started to come down.

As rain.

The water thundered back towards the desert with exhilarating force.

The people of Baktan stood and simply gaped at the spectacle. The hard white column was an enormous gout of water. It had broken out of the ground and thrown itself high into the air above the people, ejected by the massive forces of nature at work below ground. It rained on the people, who held their hands up over their heads and shrieked with the joy and sheer terror of the spectacle.

And then the desert under Baktan finally caved in, giving way beneath

the huge weight of the shattered city, allowing the crumbling remains to fall into a huge new canyon opening up before them like a rocky mouth. And as the city fell, it sent up colossal sprays of shimmering silver light, because the chasm beneath it had filled with ice water.

The quaking of the ground began to subside, leaving the faintest tremble.

To the masses of Eskoni and slimers congregated on the plateau, which now overlooked the canyon, it was like firm ground again.

221

Many wanted to cheer, and laugh, but were simply too overwhelmed by what they had seen. Most were still half deaf from the noise. All were wet through.

One man watched the thing with only the faintest of smiles on his face. Fitz Kreiner viewed the whole thing with a sense of relief and cold satisfaction.

Somehow, he had known that it would have to end like this. He raised a trembling hand to his face and wiped away the water that was streaming down his cheeks.

‘It never rains,’ he said to himself, ‘but it pours.’

Then he began to run, with everyone else around him, down towards the newly formed canyon. Where Baktan had once stood, there was only empty space and a cloud of water vapour. Fitz knew it must be insanely dangerous to pelt down the wet sand, that at any moment there might be another quake or explosion of water, but he couldn’t help it. He was caught up in the strange sense of release, and relief and simple comfort that he was still alive now.

And, like everyone else around him, he had to see the water. He, more than anyone else, had to see it first-hand.

He pushed his way through the gathering crowds by the water’s edge. It was still foaming and heaving, hissing with the steady downpour of rain that was still falling now.

He stood and watched the swell of the water, and somehow caught a whiff of the almost religious awe with which the Eskoni were regarding it. To most this was a divine experience, a living and literal miracle. The appearance of this much water on the surface of Eskon

was just a dream, or else a note in the history books. Next to this, the loss of their city was nothing.

Eventually, satisfied that there were not going to be any immediate aftershocks, Fitz sat down on the sand – was it now really a beach? – and watched the lake settle. Every so often, huge chunks of jagged blue-white ice would erupt through the surface of the water with a roar, and to applause from the crowd. The sun would then set about melting the ice, streams of water gushing off its crystal surfaces, adding depth and purity to the swirling lagoon.

Nearly an hour later, by Fitz's vaguest reckoning, something else surfaced. It wasn't an iceberg, and it couldn't have been a rock. It was small and dark, and bobbed gently on the glittering skin of the water.

Fitz stood up, shielding his eyes with one hand and staring at the shape. It looked like a coffin or a sarcophagus. It drifted closer to the shoreline, and Fitz saw that the shape had copper-coloured hair.

It was Compassion.

But she seemed almost immobile, corpse-like. Yet she couldn't be killed, could she? She floated for a few more seconds on her back, drifting towards 222

the edge of the lake.

Then her body opened up and the Doctor popped his head out, bruised and bedraggled. With a grin, he pulled himself up out of Compassion like the commander of a miniature submarine.

'I was just wondering,' he called up to the people gathered by the shore:

'could we possibly borrow a glass of water?'

223

Chapter Thirty

When the Heat Cools Off

Much later, when the afternoon sun was shimmering on the surface of the new lake like polished gold, the Eskoni survivors starting to think about how to rebuild their lives.

'I told you today would be a new beginning,' the Doctor was saying to

the last member of Baktan's original Forum, Old Krumm.

'There were times when I didn't think I'd see it,' said the old Eskoni. 'Thank you, Doctor. For all that you've done.'

'Don't thank me. Your work's only just beginning, Krumm. And it will be very hard work too – more than just rebuilding a city.'

Old Krumm stroked his grizzled chin thoughtfully, and spared a sharp glance at the Doctor's two companions, who were talking some distance away.

'Yes, I know. Your young friend made that very plain.'

'Fitz's heart is in exactly the right place, although sometimes he doesn't realise it,' replied the Doctor, also gazing at his companions. 'It just takes a while for him to find it sometimes. You could learn a lot from him.'

'He says that he cannot stay. That he, you and Compassion will leave us shortly.'

The Doctor just nodded.

'Are those creatures gone for ever, Doctor?' Old Krumm looked searchingly into the Time Lord's unreadable expression.

'Oh, I should think so. Every last one of the Spulvers will have been crushed in the destruction of the city. Any that weren't will have drowned, I'd imagine.

Compassion has run a deep-penetration sensor scan of the entire area, and she can't detect any more of them.'

'And the contamination?'

'Entirely swept away when the deep ice melted. This lake has been formed from the upper ice reservoirs compressed by tectonic shift. The pressure just shot it straight up and out on to the surface – along with Compassion and me.'

'So we're safe, at last?'

The Doctor nodded. 'And that means that we must be going on our way. . . '

'Well, I suppose that leaves me to do everything else.' Old Krumm

sighed.

‘I’m a bit long in the tooth for that kind of leadership thing now. I’m not even 225

sure that the Forum shouldn’t be declared defunct. It can hardly be a Forum with only one member.’

‘Only one?’ the Doctor queried. ‘I count three.’

Old Krumm frowned.

The Doctor counted off his fingers: ‘There’s you, Brevus and Ckeho.’

Brevus and Ckeho were walking down the sandy slope towards the elderly Eskoni and the Time Lord. Brevus was looking out across the glittering lake, his face alive with excitement.

‘Brevus is young and willing, and he’s learned a lot in the last few days,’ said the Doctor. ‘And that is far more important than the fact that he was related to Anavolus. And as for Ckeho. . . well, the slimers will need representation in any new Forum. He’s ideal.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Old Krumm. ‘And he is, after all, the son of Tor Grymna.’

The Doctor gave the Eskoni a sideways glance, uncertain if he was having his leg pulled. Old Krumm merely regarded him with a lively twinkle in his eyes, a little light that had been absent for a very long time.

Brevus and Ckeho arrived, the slimer looking older and more confident than the Doctor remembered him.

‘Well,’ he said lightly, ‘I’ll leave you all to it. Sorry about the mess, but. . .’

‘Doctor,’ said Ckeho, ‘in time to come, this may be the greatest thing that has ever happened to Baktan. It might have been painful, but it will be worthwhile. We’ll make sure it is.’

Brevus said, ‘The new lake will soon attract visitors from other Eskoni city-states. Our people will be in a position of some power.’

‘We can use that power to help all of Eskon,’ added Old Krumm. ‘We now know that it might be possible to release more of the ice reservoirs on to the surface, or to create thermal springs. . . Who knows where it might lead?’

Doctor?’

But the Doctor had gone.

Fitz watched him walking slowly up the slope of the sand dune, his trousers frayed and dirty, his shirt torn and open at the neck, its stiff wing collar almost gone. The dark velvet frock coat had definitely seen better days as well. The mane of hair flicked back from his high forehead flapped in the cooling breeze flowing off the lake.

He looks dog-tired, thought Fitz. At least as bad as I feel. But as the Time Lord approached, his features lifted from long, pale exhaustion to cheery eagerness. Fitz knew what was coming next.

‘Right,’ said the Doctor, clapping his hand together. ‘Let’s be off, then.’

‘Different times and places?’ asked Compassion.

226

‘Exactly.’ The Doctor met her gaze levelly, and an unspoken memory passed between them. For a few minutes, down in the caves when the water had threatened to drown him, the Doctor had been convinced that Compassion had abandoned him. Almost convinced. A tiny flicker of trust had lived on inside him as the torrent had engulfed him and closed its freezing fist around him. He had been lost in the maelstrom, until he had suddenly felt himself grabbed by the scruff of the neck. Seconds later he had woken up inside Compassion’s console room, coughing up icy water and spluttering for air.

The force of the earthquake had shot the contents of the cavern up and out through the weakened crust of the planet like a giant geyser, and Compassion had allowed herself to be carried along with the current.

Now, she just gave him the slightest of nods. Understood.

Fitz, oblivious to the communication, said, ‘They’ve still got problems here, Doctor. Big problems.’ He was looking out over the water, but he was seeing the smiling eyes of a young Eskoni girl with no name.

‘We can’t solve everything, Fitz,’ said the Doctor.

I know, Fitz wanted to argue, but he really didn’t have the energy. ‘It’s just that they have so much to learn, don’t they?’ he said aloud.

‘At least they’re still here to learn, Fitz. And by all accounts they had a few sharp lessons, courtesy of Space Captain Kreiner. Old Krumm spoke very highly of you.’

‘I just told him a few home truths, that’s all.’

A thought suddenly seemed to strike the Doctor. ‘Fitz – do you want to stay here? Continue your good work?’

Fitz actually laughed out loud. ‘What? Fitz the great civic reformer? Do me a favour!’

‘If you insist,’ agreed the Doctor. He slung his arm over Fitz’s narrow shoulders and guided him towards Compassion, who was starting to look impatient.

‘There’re some new people I’d like you to meet. I don’t know who they are yet, or where they will be – but I can promise you it’s going to be fun finding out.’

‘And very dangerous,’ said Fitz.

‘Oh, yes. . . that too!’

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227

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About the Author

Trevor Baxendale contributed illustrations and short stories to many *Doctor Who* fanzines in the 1980s, including a full-colour painting for the award-winning *The Frame* to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *Doctor Who*. He also provided additional illustrations for *The Gallifrey Chronicles*, published by Virgin in 1991.

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Document Outline

- Front Cover
- Contents
- 1: A Hard Place
- 2: Once Bitten
- 3: Into the Fire
- 4: Warm Welcome
- 5: Baktan
- 6: Challenges
- 7: The Inside-Out Planet
- 8: The Hard Line
- 9: Agendas
- 10: Family Matters
- 11: Slimer!
- 12: Close Quarters
- 13: Ckeho
- 14: The Squirming
- 15: Fear of the Dark
- 16: Eve of Disaster
- 17: The Expedition
- 18: Fall Girl
- 19: Fight
- 20: Fright
- 21: Better Out Than In
- 22: Hijack
- 23: Detonator
- 24: Sins of the Father
- 25: Best-Laid Schemes
- 26: Food Chain
- 27: Last Word
- 28: Ice Breaker
- 29: It Never Rains...
- 30: When the Heat Cools Off
- Acknowledgements
- About the Author

Table of Contents

Chapter One: A Hard Place	
Chapter Two: Once Bitten	
Chapter Three: Into the Fire	
Chapter Four: Warm Welcome	
Chapter Five: Baktan	
Chapter Six: Challenges	
Chapter Seven: The Inside-Out Planet	
Chapter Eight: The Hard Line	
Chapter Nine: Agendas	
Chapter Ten: Family Matters	
Chapter Eleven: Slimer!	
Chapter Twelve: Close Quarters	
Chapter Thirteen: Ckeho	
Chapter Fourteen: The Squirming	
Chapter Fifteen: Fear of the Dark	
Chapter Sixteen: Eve of Disaster	
Chapter Seventeen: The Expedition	
Chapter Eighteen: Fall Girl	
Chapter Nineteen: Fight	
Chapter Twenty: Fright	
Chapter Twenty-One: Better Out Than In	
Chapter Twenty-Two: Hijack	
Chapter Twenty-Three: Detonator	
Chapter Twenty-Four: Sins of the Father	
Chapter Twenty-Five: Best-Laid Schemes	
Chapter Twenty-Six: Food Chain	
Chapter Twenty-Seven: Last Word	
Chapter Twenty-Eight: Ice Breaker	
Chapter Twenty-Nine: It Never Rains. . .	
Chapter Thirty: When the Heat Cools Off	
Acknowledgements	
About the Author	